THE RADICAL YEARS OF I.L. PERETZ

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes the works of Yiddish and Hebrew writer Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915) during the 1890's. It criticaly engages with the entire range of Peretz's literary output during this period in both languages. It argues that Peretz functioned as a literary agent of the Jewish working class in Eastern Europe which was an ethnic-class fraction that was represented politically by the emerging Jewish Socialist Bund. During this period, Peretz's Yiddish-centric ideology emerged alongside his development as a writer of prose as well as of poetry. Thus he evolved from being a social realist, naturalist, and romantic bilingual politically radical writer into becoming a predominantly Yiddish writer of symbolist drama, folk-tales, and neo-romantic Hasidic stories and poetry during the 20th century. This thesis refutes the long-standing convention in Peretz-scholarship that his interest in new literary styles coinsided with a rejection of revolutionary politics; rather it reflected his ongoing search for new ways of expressing his radicalism.

Contents

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To Laura

Introduction

In order to understand Peretz's essays and fiction of the early 1890's, it will help to start with a brief introduction of the historical context and Peretz's intellectual standing within it. The goal of the following section is to provide such a context.

A. The Intellectual and Historical Backdrop of Peretz's Early Work (1888-1892)

Warsaw Positivism

The industrialization of the Polish economy at the end of the 19th century was reflected by the cultural movement known as Warsaw Positivism. It emphasized "organic work" (*praca organiczna* in Polish) and it substituted the usual call for national independence from the Russians with a call for Polish economic and cultural development. Similarly, Peretz's version of Jewish nationalism at the time emphasized economic development and a modern national culture, while it questioned the need for Jewish statehood.

The liberal-capitalist wave of development that swept over Eastern Europe treated religious and national distinctions as irrational barriers to the march of economic progress. Its ideology includes a strong belief in rational science as the means of true progress for mankind. Some, like the adherents of the Frankfurt School, argue that this belief is detached from ethical considerations. In fact, the associated economic boom and accompanying freedoms did result in some real progress for the Jews, who began to enjoy greater legal equality and improved social conditions starting in 1863.

Like his good friend and collaborator, the important Jewish cultural leader in Warsaw Nahum Sokolow (1859–1936), Peretz was inspired by Aleksander Świętochowski (1849 –1938), one of the founders of the Positivist movement in Poland. Świętochowski preached for a swift adaptation of society to progress, and argued that true progress could only be accomplished through a change in religious traditions.[1] Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (sometimes known as Leon Peretz), son of middle class family of merchants, left his hometown Zamość, a small town in south-east Poland, of less than 15 thousand people at the time (about half of whom were Jewish), and established himself permanently in Warsaw in 1890. He was a lawyer by profession, and known in the literary world as a Hebrew poet. In Warsaw, he began to form relations with the intelligentsia. Sokolow describes his transformation, and his integration, noting that Peretz became:

> *"...more Polonized, meaning, not in the sense of some political theory, but rather in the sense of everyday life, the ways of the world, the use of language, and so on. He used to speak Polish then; and he used to use this language with us and at his home, and anywhere he went. Mainly he read Russian literature, but he also used to read a lot in Polish, and I remember that Świętochowski influenced him a great deal.*[2]

In the Jewish Positivist circles the attitude toward the Yiddish language, the dominant vernacular of Eastern European Jewry, was purely practical. Their perception was that the Jewish masses were in need of information about *melokhe* (crafts and trades), about their meaning and usefulness, and that in order to be understood, such information would have to be in Yiddish. They also saw a need for pamphlets and booklets about themes of hygiene. Peretz complains in a Hebrew letter to the Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) in

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[1]Shoshana Anish Stiftel, *The Mediator: Nahum Sokolow's Leadership between Tradition and Zionism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2012), 88-89.

[2]Nahum Sokolow, *Ishim* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Stybl, 1935), 53; also quoted in Anish Stiftel, *The Mediator: Nahum Sokolow's Leadership between Tradition and Zionism*, 102.

1888 about the limited scope of Yiddish content (too much fiction and not enough science) being published at the time:

> *Instead of knowledge and science, which are the bread, the meat, the water, the clothing, and the place of residence for a man's soul, we are giving them [the masses] belletristic artifacts and spoils!...all of our efforts would be in vain if we fail to enrich our literature with science books.*[3]

Peretz wrote to Sholem Aleichem regarding his plans to establish a popular-science library in Yiddish. He claimed that he was qualified to write about psychology (he mentions Wilhelm Wundt, one of the founders of modern psychology), sociology, and "perhaps" about physics as well. He writes that he can adapt a whole array of these books in just one month if Sholem Aleichem can help him find relevant books in either Russian, Polish, or German (Peretz did not then live in a big city, and lacked easy access to source material). However, amongst the positivists, the feeling was that it would not be tragic if the so-called Jewish *jargon* (how Yiddish was referred to back then) eventually disappear from the map.[4]

The Positivist movement was gradually succeeded in Polish society by what is called *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) starting from the 1890's for almost thirty years. It was a modernist movement that embraced impressionism, symbolism, decadence, neo-romanticism – all styles in which Peretz dabbled starting in the 1890's with various degrees of success alongside his realist-naturalist literature. *Młoda Polska* were influenced by the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, who questioned western-Christian moral and claimed freedom for the individual, and by

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[3]I.L. Peretz, *Briv un redes*, compiled by Nakhman Mayzel (Yiddish) (Vilne: B. Kletskin, 1929), 11-45 (letters 1-6 and 8-10), 17-18. This collection includes Yiddish translations of the letters as well. Peretz's debut in Yiddish, the long poem *Monish*, was published also in 1888 in Sholem's Aleichem's almanac Di *yudishe folks-bibliyotek.* All translations from Yiddish or Hebrew are done by Adi Mahalel.

[4]More about the positivist milieu in Warsaw can be found in: Jacob Shatzky, "Perets-shtudyes," (Yiddish) *YlVO-bleter* 28 (1946): 40-80.

Arthur Schopenhauer who questioned the rationalist-optimist spirit of the Enlightenment, and emphasized human suffering and the redeeming power of art.[5]

Peretz's Attitudes towards Writing in Yiddish

Already in 1886, Peretz "confessed" his affinity to Yiddish (which he calls "the language of Beril and Shmeril") in a Hebrew poem published in the almanac *Ha-Asif* entitled *Manginot Ha-Zman* ("The Melodies of the Time"). There he writes:

> *My fellow writers\ Do not hold a grudge\ If I am fond of the language of Beril and Shmeril - \ And I would not say with contempt\ "Inarticulate" regarding their tongue'\ For it is the language of my people\ I shall hear it coming out of their mouths!\ Not the holy tongue.\ Not the language of the prophets,\ But the language of the exiled.\ The language of the Jews!*[6]

This plea to his fellow Hebrew writers not to be hated for writing in Yiddish, was characteristic to 19 century Yiddish writers, who all felt a need to explain their linguistic preference to other members of the Jewish intelligentsia.[7] Peretz had been a Hebrew writer since the 1870's and was then known mostly as a Hebrew poet, although he was also capable of writing in Polish. He first expressed his ideas concerning writing in Yiddish in his letters to Sholem Aleichem. He told his friend about the inseparable connection he felt between *nationalism* and *language* and about the need to produce texts spanning every form of knowledge without being restricted to literature:

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[5]See *Polish Literature from 1864 to 1918: Realism And Young Poland: An Anthology*. Ed. and trans. Michael J. Mikoś. Bloomington: Slavica, 2006.

[6]I.L. Peretz, *Kitvey Y.L. Perets* (Tel Aviv: Dvir), taf-pey-gimel – taf-pey-daled).

[7]See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*: *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973, new edition 1996), 12.

> *Everybody admits that one of the things that solidify nationalism is the language. I already said in my previous letter that in order for the language to be a lightning rod it must be a language that invents everything that the soul needs for its speakers and readers. And therefore, stories by themselves cannot revive the language itself, can't revive us.*[8]

In another Hebrew letter from 1889 to Sholem Aleichem, Peretz expresses an ambition, also shared by other writers at the time such as S"Y Abramovitsh (1835–1917), to form a standard Yiddish literary language that would unite the different Yiddish dialects. Through this nationalist practice of standardizing the lingua, it would be understood by Jews in different parts of Eastern Europe. Peretz writes:

> *I won't look on jargon as on a "second fiddle" and not as a transient means. I wish it to be a language, and therefore we must expand its treasures and constantly add new dialects to it so that a writer won't say: "This place is too narrow for me…"*[9]

A few years later, in his article "Bildung" (1891), Peretz emphasized the functionality and the usefulness of writing in Yiddish for spreading modern ideas. At the same time, at least in the following passage which was in line with the positivist mindset, he deemphasized any intrinsic value that the language possessed:

> *We want to encourage our people to write in Yiddish, because we have about 3 million people who understand only Yiddish. But we do not consider jargon to be holy. We sympathize very openly with those who wish to substitute Yiddish for a spoken state-language...we sympathize even more strongly with the adherents of "safa brura".*[10]

This quote shows that Peretz does not fully break away from the Jewish Enlightenment's agenda to eradicate Yiddish which it perceived as an obstacle to modernization, in favor of

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[8]Peretz, *Briv un Redes* (1929), 26.

[9]Ibid, 38.

[10]I.L. Peretz, Ale Verk-vol 8, 8. All quotes will be taken from: Y. L. Peretz, *Ale Verk fun Y. L. Perets* [Collected Works], 11 vol. (New York: CYCO, 1947-1948).

European state-languages and Hebrew. Thus he sympathizes with *Safa brura* ("Clear Language"), a society for the promotion of Hebrew as a spoken language, which Peretz was associated with for a while. Instead, he offers a temporary tactical compromise: the Yiddish language should be developed in order to *promote* modernizing the millions of Jews who only speak Yiddish. His thinking was that in the long run, Yiddish would run its course, and other dominant languages would take its place. In his view, such an eventual outcome should not be viewed as tragic, but as an inevitable cost of progress.

"Peretzian Yiddish"

Peretz played a key role in producing a modern standardized Yiddish language through the creation of Yiddish literature and by participating in related projects. In his letters and other sources, a negation of colloquial language often surfaces. This tendency is especially notable in his poetry as reflected in the use of particular Polish-Yiddish rhymes that might not be understood by other Yiddish speakers. Peretz's linguistic position in this period can be summed up as a bridge between urban Yiddish and small town Yiddish. In many ways, Peretz was inventing the concept of an urban middle class textual Yiddish, since it was a language he himself rarely used in his everyday conduct. Polish was much more natural to him as a spoken language. At the popular literary salon he hosted, discussions were held in Polish rather than Yiddish.[11]

Yudl Mark has formulated three central-characteristics of Peretz's literary Yiddish language:

1. [It is] a spoken rather than written language.
2. It is dialectally tinged.

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[11]Ella Bauer," From the Salons to the Street: The Development of the Jewish Salon in Warsaw at the End of the 19th Century," in: *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts/Simon Dubnow Institute* Yearbook 7 (2008), 155.

3. It a language of a learned person, that of a Jewish intellectual.[12]

All three characteristics are to be found in Peretz's 1890's work which will be examined throughout these chapters. Mark contends that Peretz's Yiddish became much more refined and rich during the last 15 years of his life (1900-1915), as compared with his language during the 1890's and earlier.[13] But the birth of his Yiddish happens without a doubt during the earlier years, and therefore demands special analytical attention.

Regarding Peretz's use of language in his Yiddish masterpiece in prose *Bilder fun a Provints Rayze* ("Impressions of a Journey Through the Provinces", 1891), Mark Caplan argued that Peretz fragmented his language into its three parts, i.e. its Germanic, Slavic, and Hebraic components (just as he fragmented the narrative structure). Caplan called his linguistic style "an archaic regionalism". He also sees in it "an act of resistance to the notion, however embryonic or anticipatory it would be in the 1890s, of Yiddish as a unifying linguistic culture for Ashkenazi Jews."[14] But such a statement lies in contradiction to Peretz's national project. Peretz did not oppose a "universal Yiddish", as suggested by Caplan in fact, he actively promoted it.

Caplan also notes, in regard to *Bilder*, that Peretz's Yiddish style combines both the "local and the archaic".[15] Caplan's assessment applies equally to Peretz's Yididsh short story *In Postvagon* ("In The Mail Coach", 1890) and to other Yiddish prose work from the same period. By "archaic" Yiddish, he means a language that is infused with a large quantity of

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[12] See Yudl Mark "An analiz fun Y.L. Peretses shprakh," (Yiddish) *YlVO-bleter* 28 (1946), 112. Peretz was educated in traditional Jewish learning and discovered modern European literature while in his early teens, see more about his childhood in his memoirs: I.L. Peretz, *Zikhroynes* (Memoir) (Yiddish), Ale Verk: 11, 5-134.

[13]Mark "An analiz fun Y.L. Peretses shprakh," 111.

[14]Marc Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 70.

[15]Ibid, 69.

Talmudic expressions which effectively estrange the traditional characters from the more modern narrator. The linguistic estrangement is achieved, notes Caplan, by "an intensification of literary language, so that the language of "home" becomes unfamiliar to the modern reader, indicating that the concept of home has become re-territorialized, beyond the modern Jew's grasp".[16]

Nascent Jewish Nationalism and Peretz's Brand of Nationalism

As opposed to a kind of territorial nationalism that puts its emphasis on the need for sovereignty, Peretz's nationalism was first and foremost defined in linguistic and cultural terms. Although he maintained relations with proto-Zionists groups, Peretz expressed increasing doubt regarding the validity of their program.

In the essay *Bildung* (1891), Peretz appeals to modern Jewish intellectuals and encourages them to reach out to the Jewish masses. In this programmatic article which owes a great deal to the Warsaw Positivist movement, Peretz lays out the foundation of his brand of Jewish nationalism: it is a "folk" nationalism, more civilizational in its character than political. The "folk" was for him the only genuine source of national creativity.[17] Peretz believed that what the Jewish people needed most at the time was *Bildung*, or modern education.

According to Henry Wasserman, who researched the concept of *Bildung* in the German contexts, the idea of *Bildung* contributed to the formation of a consciousness of privilege, specialness, and "chosen-ness" of individuals and a whole segment of society. It was even

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[16]Ibid, 71.

[17]Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward A New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 80.

capable of generating a sense of "chosen-ness" and destiny for an entire nation. That sense of destiny was based on the achievements and the glory of the national culture, while its humanistic and universal values and content gradually disappeared under a wave of uncritical self-adoration – a process that was obvious after Germany became unified and whole. A similar development occurred in most national movements and nation-states. Wasserman also emphasizes the vital role the intelligentsia played in the in the national project (i.e., the creation of the liberal-democracy). And amongst the intelligentsia, the writers are particularly important. They are the "men of the nation", as they were referred to in Germany, a hundred years before Peretz.[18]

Wasserman sums up the nationalization of the *Bildung* concept, a stage that seems most relevant to Peretz's idea of the concept:

> *In the process of establishing a national culture, the Bildung concept gradually changed its character. On top of the "enlightenment" ideal, which was a part of it, there was the universal meaning (according to Kant's philosophy and his followers) of emancipation; it was an integral factor that contributed to the establishment of a universal community in which man – every man – stands in the middle of the universe, free to develop his humanist talents. As such, the Bildung was consistent with the concepts of liberty, equality, and brotherhood of the Enlightenment and the revolution. But with the consolidation of the bourgeois as a class, the Bildung became more of a tool used to insure its social and political domination, mainly for producing public officials and cultural agents who spread the bourgeoisie ethos and dominated cultural and political domains. As the bourgeoisie became more national, the "Bildung" too became more national; it abandoned its universal ethos and focused on nourishing and spreading its national agenda, thus became a major tool in establishing a nation-state.* [19]

[18]Henry Wasserman, *Akh germanya heykhan hi?* (Germany, where is it to be found?) (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Oniversita Ha-ptukha, 2001).

[19]Ibid, 223-237

"Chauvinism is awful!" Peretz writes[20] even as he is in the process of establishing an ideology that incorporates some basic nationalist thinking; being himself an agent of his kind of national agenda. Without descending into extreme particularism, Peretz is advocating the postponement of complete universalism and the unification of all of humanity into one language and one civilization. "Individuals need not and cannot unite, nor– peoples!"[21] He writes. Peretz writes to Sholem Aleichem in 1888:

> *I don't understand why you ask only about the lives of our people. Is it not necessary for a nation to know the life of another nation that it lives with? Is it not necessary for it to know the ways of the general life? Why shouldn't we study general questions? Why do you limit it only to private questions? It is true that they are more important, but also the less important question is not a luxury. We must invent everything for ourselves.*[22]

This duality expressed also in the quote above from *Bildung* ("Chauvinism is awful!"), of particular-universal in regard to relations between "peoples" is an instrument employed to begin with by Peretz in order to invent and distinguish his own Jewish Ashkenazi people. The same dialectic rhetoric Peretz uses in the letter.

On the surface, Peretz's version of *Bildung* encompasses a whole nation: a large group of people, through the use of modern means of communication (mostly the press), becomes able to imagine their commonality. He writes that his choice to use Yiddish stems from both the need to "educate" the people (i.e. for propaganda purposes) and of "knowing" the people (i.e. penetrating the *Volksgeist* in Herder's terms). It is not yet the kind of *yidishist* nationalism that would develop in the coming decades. Peretz writes in *Bildung*:"He who wants to know

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[20]Peretz, Ale Verk-vol 8, 11.

[21]Ibid, 16.

[22]Peretz, *Briv un redes* (1929), 18.

the people, and he who wants to teach the people – he must be able to speak and write in Yiddish."[23]

Peretz needs Yiddish in order to establish his nationalist project, and to do so, he must imbue Yiddish with the power to accurately reflect the very "spirit of the people", as some magical key with which to unlock his imagined community and truly know its essence. What is unusual about Peretz's brand of nationalism is that it lacked any geo-political component. Thus, Peretz's nationalism without a homeland or territory stands in contrast to the proto-Zionist nationalism of the time which based on the narrative of "return" to the historical homeland of the Jews in Palestine.

Regarding the option of migrating westward, to Western Europe or America, Peretz in 1891 thought it was an unfeasible solution for the poor masses, since any country would eventually limit the entry of masses of people without any capital. Most Jews did not posses even the small capital needed for travel. Peretz tried to convince his (mostly lower-middle class) readers in *Bildung* that he had the interests of the poor Yiddish-speaking Jews in mind (those who would stay in Eastern-Europe).

Through Hebrew, Peretz did not believe that Eastern European Jewry could ever acquire a modern education: "In Hebrew we lack even one science"(p. 10), he writes. Peretz on the one hand broadens the *maskilic (Jewish Enlightenment)* themes, of knowing the state language (Polish in his case) plus Hebrew, to include Yiddish ("three million people live in it"[24]). On the other hand he confronts what he calls "nationalist chauvinists" who adhere strictly to

[23]Peretz, Ale Verk-vol 8, 12.

[24]"Hebrew we have to know as Jews, but – as educated people, as living people, we must know the state language." ("Bildung,"in Ale Verk, vol8, 11).

Hebrew (the "Holy Tongue") and throw out the "nanny" (i.e. Yiddish) before it has completed its modernizing task. Peretz personifies and feminizes Yiddish, the language that became to be known, as *dos mame-loshn*, the "Mother-Tongue.[25]

Jan Bloch, Peretz and The Structure of Jewish Economy

The economic development in Russian Empire, and the relative tolerance exhibited toward Jews since the mid-late 19th century, sparked massive waves of Jewish migration to the city from outlying provinces. For example, during the years 1874-1897, the Jewish population of Warsaw city grew by 130%, from 90,000 to 220,000. A new social class was growing within the Jewish population, by the end of the nineteenth century, made up of working-class (Yiddish speaking) Jews.[26] According to the lowest estimates, there were about 400,000 Jewish wage workers in the Pale of Settlement in 1898 (most were craftsmen, very few worked in agriculture). They were almost exclusively employed by Jewish employers.[27]

Jan Bloch (1836–1902), was a philanthropist, financier, and railway giant, who belonged to the Jewish plutocracy of Warsaw, who dominated the board of the Warsaw Jewish community.[28] An apostate Jew since 1851[29], he financed both the statistical expedition that

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[25]For a brief introduction to the discussion of multilingualism amongst Eastern European Jews, see Benjamin Harshav's article, "Language: Multilingualism." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 27 October 2010. 3 October 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Language/Multilingualism). For a thorough discussion of the Yiddish-Hebrew bi-lingualism of Shalom Ya'akov Abramovitsh's (Mendele Moykher-Sforim), see: Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 421-498.

[26]Blatman, Daniel. "Bund." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 30 July 2010. 12 September 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund .

[27]Yoav Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: the Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in late Imperial Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 25-27.

[28]Consisted of no more than 5 percent of Warsaw Jewry, the Jewish plutocracy of Warsaw played a disproportionate role in the cultural life of Warsaw in general and in the management of Warsaw Jewry (giving financial support to numerous Jewish educational and cultural initiatives) for the half century before World War I. (Bacon, Gershon. "Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 14

was represented in Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints Rayze* as well as the two volumes of the almanac *Yidishe Bibliyotek* (both publications were from 1891; *Bilder* appeared in the second volume). Bloch would also become well-known for his passionate advocacy for the pacifist idea. The publication of Bloch's seven-volume study on the nature of future wars in 1898, *Budushchaia vayna v tekhnicheskom, ekonomicheskom ipoliticheskom otnosheniakh* (The Future of War in Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations), helped lead to the convening of the first Peace Congress in The Hague in 1899. In these texts he argued that a future armed conflict would have disastrous consequences for all participants.[30] These views would also have an effect on Peretz himself, who mentions the pacifist movement several times in his articles.

Bloch sponsored a statistical expedition, recruiting members of the Jewish intelligentsia like Peretz and Sokolow to gather information about the Jews living within the Pale of Settlement. Jews were restricted to living in the Pale according to Czarist laws dating from the early 19th century.[31] Jewish impoverishment in the Pale is best explained as a product of the uneven and shaky economic development of the Russian Empire as a whole. Jacob Lestschinsky writes:

March 2011. 17 August http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poland/Poland_from_1795_to_1939). For a broader discussion of the Warsaw Jewish community during the 19th century, see Yankev Shatsky, *Di geshikhte fun yidn in Varshe* (The History of the Jews in Warsaw), 3 vols (Yiddish) (New York: YIVO, 1947-1953).

[29]Polonsky, Antony. "Bloch, Jan." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 27 July 2010. 13 April 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bloch_Jan). The year of his final conversion is of course deeply connected to the launch of his banking career since discrimination laws prevented from Jews entry in high positions in banking as in many other fields. More on Bloch's life in his biography: Ryszard Kołodziejczyk, *Jan Bloch. 1836–1902: Szkic do portretu 'Króla polskich kolei'* (Polish) (Warsaw, 1983)

[30]Polonsky, Antony. "Bloch, Jan." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 27 July 2010. 11 November 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bloch_Jan. Also: Peter Van den Dungen, *The Making of Peace: Jean de Bloch and the First Hague Peace Conference* (Los Angeles: California State University, 1983).

[31]Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 22-24.

> *Two processes characterize the development of the Jewish people in the course of the 19th century: the process of emigration and the process of social differentiation... The decay of the feudal system and of feudal property and the rapid growth of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe created new sources for subsistence, but in a far greater measure they destroyed [the Jews'] positions as intermediaries, by which the greatest part of the Jewish people lived. These processes forced the Jewish masses to change their living places as well as their social appearance; forced them to seek a new place in the world and a new occupation in society.*[32]

Polish Jews had historically been the middlemen between the Polish aristocrats and the Polish peasants, enjoying a degree of relative prosperity and stability. During the latter part of the 19th century, when the economy was shaky, Jews feared that the same discriminatory May Laws of 1882 which were already in effect in the Pale (laws which prohibited Jews from the countryside within the Pale, thus further limiting their economic opportunities)[33] - would be applied to Jews in Poland as well. If such discriminatory laws were to pass, it would clearly block the road for Jews wanting to integrate into the changing economy, and would mean that the threats on Jews in Congress Poland are increasing.[34]

The goal of the statistical expedition funded by Bloch was to prove under scientific methods that Jews contribute to the general economy, that they work the land, and that many of them, in contrast to the common stereotype (of Jews with money), are in fact, impoverished. The issue of discriminatory legislation against Jews was a reflection of the class struggle between

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[32] Jacob Lestschinsky, *The Development of the Jewish People in the Last One Hundred Years* (Yiddish) (Berlin, 1928), 1. Quoted by: Abram Leon. *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* (Pathfinder Pr, 1971).

[33] Peled, ibid. and Klier, John. "Pale of Settlement." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 14 September 2010. 4 August 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pale_of_Settlement).

[34] Ruth Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1991), 18-19.

the upper-bourgeoisie and the old Polish aristocracy, in which the latter used anti-Semitism in its reactionary struggle against modernization at large.[35]

Up until 1893, when he strengthened his ties with Jewish socialists activists and intellectuals (such as Dovid Pinski), Peretz served a middle-man, between the capitalist Bloch, and the lower class Jews through his cultural productions. He and others like him, were sent by Bloch to prove that Jews were contributing to the modernization of the economy; and it served as a way of advocating for the modern economy itself. Peretz's pro-capitalist state of mind was evident from his writings. He wrote at the time:"without competition craftsmanship did not develop, it was always stuck. That all the tailors of the world should make a partnership, – I have not yet come to this great fantasy."[36]

Peretz, the writer, was living other fantasies at the time. One can speculate that his commitment to his patron prevented him from suggesting any radical social solutions at this stage. Sokolow described nicely the relationship between the economic elites involved in the Jewish communal affairs, like Bloch, and the middle class Jews, like Peretz. One just needs to replace in his depiction the word "spiritual" with "control", and "Jargon" (i.e., Yiddish) for "nationalism" in order to decipher the social-class dynamics in this passage:

> *The heads of the community thought about it, and an idea began to flow regarding the use of Peretz's strength for a spiritual purpose. Then the idea of the "folksbibliyotek" (Sokolow meant to write her yudishe bibliyotek, A.M.) was born, and a few of the members decided to help. There was an error here: they viewed the "Jargon" as means, and thought that the matter would assist with general education – and no more. They planned to be very active in translations from Polish. If those people*

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[35] A. Rosentsvayg, *Der radikaler peryod fun Peretses shafn* (Yiddish) (Kiev: *Melukhe Farlag far di Natsyonale Minderhaytn*, 1934), p. 36-41.

[36] "*on konkurents hot zikh di melokhe nisht antvikelt, zi iz shtendik af eyn ort geshtanen", "az ale shnayder fun der gantser velt zoln makhn shutfes, tsu der groyser fantazye iz (der shrayber) nokh nit gekumen*."(I.L. Peretz, *Iber profesyonen* (Yiddish) (Warsaw: Halter and Eisenshtat, 1894 (second edition)).

> *were writers, then they would have known that literature is not to be limited, and even less so to a literary talent like Peretz's. What was meant to be just a means – is becoming a goal in its own right. Things were not as clear then, and the parties were not as totally divided. That is how it was, which seems odd now, that people from that camp (i.e., the assimilationists, A.M.) were amongst the godfathers of the "folksbibliyotek". People were in agreement concerning a few matters. One of the slogans was "Bildung" ("education") – and who doesn't want "Bildung"? One of the tendencies was – to publish translations from the fine literature in Poland, which speaks in favor of the Jews – all right?*[37]

The participation of the middle class Jews in Jewish politics eventually led them in a nationalist direction, be it Zionism or other forms of Jewish nationalism, namely, toward the domination over Jewish institutions and communities by the Jewish middle class rather than the Jewish plutocracy. Ultimately, their involvement in Jewish communal life gave birth to a proto-nationalist stage in Jewish politics.[38]

An important testimony regarding Peretz and his state of mind at the time surrounding the expedition can again be found in Sokolow's writings. The essay Sokolow wrote in Hebrew years after the fact, entitled *Yosl the Crazy (Sketches from my Memory)*, opens with the following passages:

> *In the county of Lublin he {I.L. Peretz} was the expert, and I – in the provinces of Mazovia. Aside from dividing the regions, we also divided the labor between ourselves. He was a specialist in matters between men and women, in the traditions of the common people, in court manners (he was a private lawyer earlier in his life), in disputes with the police; I was specialized more in young study house goers, in Yeshiva students, in rabbis, in Hasidim, in proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment (maskilim)…*

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[37]Sokolow, *Ishim*. Regarding similar aspirations as Peretz's that Sokolow prescribed for the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia (including the temporal use of Yiddish), through a series of articles in Polish that came out at the same time as Bildung, see: Ella Bauer, "*Yaadey Ha-Intiligentsya Ha-Yehudit-Polanit*," (Hebrew) *Tsiyon*, Vol. samekh"khet, number 3, tashsa"g: 335-358.

[38]Daniel Gutwein, *"Ha-diplomatia Ha-yehudit ba'me'a ha-tsha esre: reshit ha-leumiyut ha-yehudit?*," (Hebrew) in *Le'umiyut ve-politica yehudit: perspectivot hadashot* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot Yisrael, 1996), 171.

Our official goal was to find the "Jewish peasants", and more accurately, the "remains of the Jewish colonists" in Poland. We did it for Jan Bloch, who was engaged with it for the sake of advocacy, "to show the people and the ministers", that the Jews practice the settling of land. Our private goal was to sail in the Jewish world, to renew what we knew from our childhood, and in order to observe new impressions. In relation to the advocacy work, we shared the same opinions, but our temperaments were different. We both had seen beforehand that advocacy is an effort in vain, that's it's about as useful as a pair of glasses is to a blind person, or physical therapy to a corpse; but Peretz the poet, in the beginning, awoke, became angry, and afterwards froze while in rage. For both of us the work was the purpose and not a means. I was then heavily occupied in literary and public work; I wanted to shatter the walls of my prison and break out, to get some fresh air; similarly did Peretz jump out of his hiding for the same multi-varied trip around the Jewish communities, like Jewish travelers in the Middle Ages before us. We experienced it sometimes together, and sometimes with other colleagues. Going quickly from city to city, from one small village to the next, it was an expedition of Jewish Don Quixotes, even more interesting than the literary visions of Mendele the Book Seller with his strange twists.[39]

The pessimistic feeling also appeared in Peretz's first literary account of a visit to the shtetl, in 1887, several years prior to the statistical expedition. It came out in the form of a Heine-inspired Hebrew poem entitled "The Small Town". The poem contains many motifs that Peretz would later develop in the Yiddish prose of *Bilder*: the deteriorating market place, the economic struggle for survival, the hunger, the fires, the *Dybbukim*, the isolation from the world (lack of access to the modern press), and the meeting of the shtetl Jews with the modern urban Jew. The character of the modern Jew is portrayed as having a hard time communicating his position to the shtetl Jews. He is a modern man, modernly dressed and mannered, but still he wants to prove to traditional Jews he is a Jew like them. The protagonist tells them:

"Oh, brothers, calm yourselves,\ I am not a goy,\ And not a wealthy person.
The short uniform\ Gave the wrong impression;\ Only one faith,\ Only one God between us".

[39]Nahum Sokolow, "Yosl the Crazy (Sketches from my Memory)," (Hebrew) *Hatekufah* 26-27, second edition (1935), 61.

*As soon as they heard\ Away they dispersed,\ "Or a heretic or a baptized Jew,\ Or an instigator seducer!" *

They dispersed, from afar\ I would still hear the curse…\ Is this supposed to relax\ A troubled soul?"[40]

The last question is asked after the speaker of the poem starts the poem by expressing the hope of finding some relaxation in the shtetl ("The town here is small,\ Here I will rest my soul;"). Dan Miron correctly describes the unnerving shtetl reality that is revealed to the modern protagonist as: "A frightening Darwinist image…an economic jungle, where everybody is so busy in the war for survival, that that becomes essentially the content of his existence".[41] In reality, Peretz himself was barely out of the shtetl at the time he wrote *Bilder*.

Nachman Meisel states that the statistical expedition to Tomaszów was the first undertaking that Peretz engaged in after moving to Warsaw in 1890.[42] Peretz ran a thriving legal practice since the late 1870's and during the 1880's in Zamość, representing prominent Polish and Jewish clients. During this period he lectured in a workers' evening school, and was also active in other civic affairs. After a decade or so of practicing law, he was stripped of his license in 1887 for allegedly promoting Polish nationalism and socialism. Unable to resume his legal practice, he moved to Warsaw the following year.[43] In reality Peretz had only arrived in the big city from the large town Zamość a few months before setting out for

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[40]Peretz, *Kol kitvey*, Taf-Pey-Tet"Taf-Tsadek.

[41]Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 102-104.

[42]Nachman Meisel, *I. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn* (Yiddish) (New York, 1945), 110–11. Meisel states that, in spite of some false starts, over time it was not difficult for Peretz to communicate with the shtetl residents." (quoted in: Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," 67-8).

[43]Wisse, Ruth R. "Peretz, Yitskhok Leybush." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 15 December 2010. 2 September 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Peretz_Yitskhok_Leybush.

Tomaszów, a region about 30 kilometers from where he had grown up.[44] Thus, the ability to reconnect with traditional Jews cannot have been as difficult for Peretz, the son of shop owners in Zamość, as he portrays it in *Bilder*.

B. The Radical Years of I.L. Peretz: My Thesis

The Proto-Socialist Peretz

My first chapter discusses the pre-radical stage of Peretz's writing career (from 1877 up to around 1893) through his major Yiddish essays and literary work from the time he settled in Warsaw in 1890 and until 1893, when the radical shift occurs. Most of his early cultural productions in Yiddish were published in the almanac *Di yudishe bibliyotek* (The Jewish Library), which he also edited. This almanac was published only twice due to lack of commercial success.[45] Though some awareness of social-class issues appears in his early writings as well, he did not actively associate with Jewish labor groups. In the editorial comments to the second *Bibliyotek* (1891) casually entitled "What's Up?" (*Vos hert zikh?*), Peretz writes about the working class and its worsening condition:

> Every day new machines are coming out that replace human labor. The workers in the meantime are increasing in number and from day to day have less work and even less income, because competition reduces the cost of labor. In all of the European countries, as is in the United States of America, the working class is restless, unsatisfied, and constantly rebelling. Governments fear rebellions, and wish in any case not to let the size of the proletarian class to grow. (Y"B, 7; Ale verk, vol 8, 37)

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[44]Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 19.

[45]Peretz intended to publish more editions but they never sold enough copies to justify such an effort. After poor sales of the first *Bibliyotek*, he wrote to Dinezon that: "It's been several months and I haven't sold one copy. I blame a lack of awareness and the cholera epidemic. I would have been able to forget that I am the publisher of the *bib'*, if it wasn't for the translators to Polish, who would harass me at times by asking me to translate and to print. And for Avrom Reyzn who sends poems until this day" (Peretz, *Briv un redes* (1929), 75).

Further in this article it is understood that Peretz is writing mostly in order to discourage emigration to the United States, and in no way does he identify himself with the working class, as one might conclude from the last quote. In a letter to Moyshe Altbreg (his cousin and childhood friend) from around 1887-8, a few years prior to his trips to the provinces, Peretz explains why he was banned from practicing law. This rejection was certainly a catalyst for the development of his Jewish national sentiment, and it paralleled the experiences of many other middle class Jews of the time who suffered similar discrimination and arrived at the same conclusions.

According to Peretz in his letter to Altberg, Peretz believes that he was banned from practicing law because his competitors falsely informed the government that he was a socialist. He describes in the letter his futile attempts to convince the authorities that he was not a socialist:

> *For a long time I have been very restless. I had to put up a tough battle with those who do not support me, who told the authorities that I am a socialist. Are you laughing? Nevertheless, I was very scared. The battle itself was a tough one, and to add to it I managed the struggle in great secrecy, so the matter wouldn't become known to anyone. My parents, my wife, and the people who know me, didn't know a thing, I bit my lip and kept silent, knowing all the while that the danger is great. Now, praise the Lord, the struggle is over and, praise the Mighty One, I fell in battle. I couldn't clearly prove that I am not a socialist, nor an enemy of the government, nor a hater of the church. I don't defend any trials of revolutionaries. – I couldn't prove my position, and yesterday an order came from the minister, saying that I should not be allowed to step into court to defend others… well, they made me out to be a socialist. Even though I have not yet brought out from my mouth any word and not yet written any word against the order of the world. And thus they swallowed me like a freshly ripe fruit at the beginning of summer.*[46]

[46]I.L. Peretz, *Briv un redes fun Y. L. Perets*, ed. Nachman Mayzel (New York: IKUF, 1944), 129; Quoted in: Sh. Niger, *I. L. Peretz* (Buenos Aires: Yiddish Cultural Congress, 1952), 196.

The twice repeated use of the phrase "not yet" (my highlight), foreshadows Peretz's radical outspokenness through much of the 1890's, suggesting that a more radical perspective was already fermenting in his heart. Remember that the *Bibliyotek* as well as the statistical expedition were funded by the capitalist, Bloch, a fact which made any open call for class struggle problematic. But as we see from this letter, it is very doubtful that Peretz was at all interested in such a social-radical agenda. In a private letter one can reveal one's true thoughts and feelings, but Peretz did not diverge from the positivist and middle-class oriented mindset of the *Bibliyotek*.[47]

The Radical Turn

The second chapter focuses on the radical shift in Peretz's work. If in the years 1888-1892, Peretz was functioning as a committed agent of the hegemonic class, from 1893 onward he made an effort to establish himself as an organic intellectual, committed to the interests of the Jewish working-class. According to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who has written extensively about the role of intellectuals in society, every exploited social group needs to develop its own cadre of intellectuals in order to help shape its people's culture and way of life according to its own interests, not according to those of the bourgeoisie.[48] Organic intellectuals articulate class perceptions and aspirations for the group in their own cultural language. Peretz himself may have not belonged to the Jewish working class, but as Gramsci writes, "An intellectual who joins the political party of a certain social group is merged with

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[47]See also Ruth R. Wisse, "The Political Vision of I.L. Peretz," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, edited by Zvi Gitelman (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2003), 124.

[48]Alon Altaras, "The Islands of Antonio Gramsci: An Introduction," (Hebrew) in Antonio Gramsci, *About the Hegemony* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), 35.

organic intellectuals who belong to the group itself, and bonds himself tightly with the group."[49] And Peretz, as I show throughout my work, and especially in chapters 2-5, has indeed joined in those years, certainly in spirit, the ranks of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund, which would in later years become the biggest Jewish-Marxist party. He simultaneously maintained connections with other types of Jewish labor activists. Peretz in those years served as a link between philosophy and the people, as an organic intellectual, he was "adept at the former (philosophy) but actively identified with the latter (the people)".[50]

I rely in my thesis, regarding the relations between Peretz and the Bund, on the work of Yoav Peled, who in his book *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: the Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in late Imperial Russia* (1989) examined the rise of an "ethno-class consciousness" amongst Jewish workers in the Russian Pale of Settlement. The same year Peretz was starting to publish his radical work, 1893, was also the year when the Jewish social-democratic *intelligenti* (active in Lithuania since the late 1880's) went from working in small elite workers circles to agitation on a mass scale, "appealing to the workers on the basis of their immediate material needs".[51]

I show in my work that Peretz's cultural productions during those years were instrumental in creating this "ethno-class consciousness" amongst Jewish workers, up to the formation of the Bund in 1897 and for several years afterwards. I show how Peretz's new sense of

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[49]Gramsci, *About the Hegemony*, 59-60.

[50]Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 119. The Bundist activist A. Litvak (1874-1932) has characterized Peretz's relationship with the masses as being balanced between the desire to educate the masses, and the willingness to learn from them. Litvak summed up Peretz's attitude as follows: "We need to learn from the masses, but we also have a lot to teach them. To deny our intellect is a sin not only against our own selves, but also against the masses themselves." A. Litvak, *Literature un Kamf: Literarishe Eseyn* (Yiddish) (New York: *Veker*, 1933), 127.

[51]Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 1.

commitment to the interests of the Jewish working-class was expressed not only in his many essays, works of prose, in his poetry, and in speaking in front of working-class audiences, but also, and maybe first and foremost, through the radical new ways he has produced art itself. This radicalization of the means of production is evident in the radical Yiddish journal *Holiday Pages* (*Yontef bletlekh*), as will be discussed in the second chapter. And its content would be examined throughout chapter two (including further discussion of its relation to the nascent Bund in light of Peled), and up until the last chapter.

The idea that Peretz made a radical turn in 1890's was first and most compressively presented in a book by the soviet literary critic A. Rosentsvayg, entitled *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn: di yontef bletlekh* (The Radical Period of Peretz's Creative-Work: The Holiday Pages; 1934). Rosentsvayg's effort emphasizes the *Holiday Pages*, Peretz's class position, and it puts forth the demand from the artist to commit to social-realism. – Rosentsvayg assumes here a somewhat mechanical relationship between the work of art, the mode of production, and one's social class. It does not take into account the possibility of sincere internal ideological struggle. However, I take my theoretical cues from the Neo-Marxists, such as Fredrick Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and others, who do not demand from an artist any commitment to a certain genre or style of writing, and present a much more refined and non-negative attitude towards modernist trends in art.

In this light, the nature of Peretz's shift in creative approach and expressive methods at the turn of the 20th century does not necessarily represent a political shift. He could have remained just as revolutionary after the turn of the century as he was before, while his primary shift was one of style (from realism to symbolism and romanticism). This theory bears some truth as I show in the chapters, (particular in relation to his Hasidic work), but also in light of the fact that he was already being influenced by and was starting to

experiment with different styles during the 1890's.With all that in mind, one cannot deny that first, during the 1890's (since 1893), a radical-socialist twist did occur in Peretz's writings. He invested himself in those years in with an unprecedented intensity to writing social-protest literature in various genres and styles. And second, in later years, even while he continued to produce radical work, (though far less intensively), these works were accompanied by works that openly criticized socialists and socialist ideologies.

The focus on Peretz's radical years came out of a rich progressive tradition of Peretz-critique that emphasized Peretz's socialist work and his deep affection for the socialist cause and towards working people. This tradition (together with the "Jewish left" itself), has been revised since the mid 20th century with work that deemphasized Peretz's relation to the Labor Movement. Interpreters as Chone Shmeruk presented Peretz as an ardent anti-revolutionary, constantly in a state of doubt and despair, resistant to any fixed political ideal, and certainly never committing himself to the socialist cause.[52] He was presented by Ruth Wisse and other scholars as having being "used" by socialists for their purposes,[53] rather than as an alert and willing participant engaged in a process of mutual inspiration.

I will dispute Wisse's argument that Peretz's texts from that period display a "constant tension between radical and conservative impulses", and argue instead that his work from that period is characterized by a clear affection for the cause of the proletarian and in a strong

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[52]See Chone Shmeruk, *Peretses yiesh-vizye: interpretatsye fun Y.L. Peretes Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (Peretz's Vision of Despair: Interpetation of I.L, Peretz's Night at the Old Market) (Yiddish) (New York: Yivo, 1971). A contemporary scholar who to my mind continues Shmeruk's line of Peretz-interpetation is Marc Caplan, see Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*".

[53]See Wisse, *Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*.

desire that "the future general granary will feed all the hungry equally".[54] I will show that up until his arrest in 1899 (following his speech at an illegal workers gathering despite his awareness that undercover police were in the crowd), Peretz was actively engaged in stimulating Jewish workers to action through his social-protest literature. In later years, he still produced, though less intensively, valuable socially-oriented literature.

"I declare openly that I am a tendentious writer… I create the scenes only in order to illustrate the particular idea", Peretz told the literary-critic and Bundist activist Moyshe Olgin in 1912 during their meeting in Vilnius. According to Olgin, Peretz himself, divided his writing career to three periods:[55]

1. *Rakhmones* (pity): "I saw the poor downhearted Jew, his poverty, his want, his need. So I wrote the "Messenger", "The Wife Mrs. Hanna", and "In a Dead Town".
2. *Ka'as* (anger):"I was angry towards the Jew for being silent. I couldn't understand his downheartedness. So I wrote "The Fur Hat", "Bontche The Silent", and "In a Summer House".
3. Symbolist: Expressing in his work the problems of Jewish life, following the weaving of new ideas and streams of thought in the Jewish street. In this category are included his works from the last decade of his life (1904-1915), which convey a turn to symbolist styles of writing. Namely in his Yiddish plays "The Golden Chain" and "Night on the Old Marketplace", in his late Hasidic stories, and in such short stories as "No Miracles Occurred", "Love", "In Polish on the Chain".

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[54]Peretz, "Vos viln mir?," in *Literatur un leben*, 1894.

[55]See Moshe Olgin, "A Day with I.L. Peretz," (Yiddish) in *Y.L. Peretz* (New York: Ikuf, 1955), 20-21. The title of the third is my own.

The bulk of this thesis deals with Peretz's works of "anger" and "pity", while acknowledging that the radical Peretz is usually the angry Peretz. I will do so while analyzing both his Yiddish and his Hebrew works. Peretz's Hebrew work will examined in chapters 3-5, and will receive special focus in the third chapter. I will show that also in his usage of Hebrew, whether in his prose or his poetry, chapters three and four respectively, Peretz had ambitions to be innovative, and that he left his mark on that language's literature as well. . He also had ambitions to write radical literature in Hebrew. I will examine in chapters 3-4 his genuine attempts at producing radical Hebrew both in light of earlier attempts at producing Hebrew socialist literature, with respect to his radical works in Yiddish. I will show that the inner-contradiction of producing radical socialist work in Hebrew while the language of the Jewish workers was Yiddish, led Peretz to experimenting only for a short period of time in writing radical Hebrew work.

However, I want to emphasize Peretz's bilingualism, because while it seems that Peretz (through Olgin) is talking only about his Yiddish works, in practice most of the works of his first two periods appear in both languages. Some of the works, like "The Wife Mrs. Hanna" and "In a Summer House" appear in Hebrew before they appear in Yiddish. Much of his Yiddish material from the same period can be found in his Hebrew work as well, and some of his Hebrew writings are particular to the development of Modern Hebrew literature.

In chapter three, through a look at his essays and satires in both Hebrew and Yiddish, I will relate to Peretz's relation to Zionism, which was mainly negative. Peretz strongly opposed the program of the influential Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha-am who proposed creating a Jewish spiritual center in Palestine. Peretz saw such a plan as elitist and completely alienated from the true needs of eastern European Jewry.

Peretz's poetry, which I analyze in the fourth chapter, serves as a critical bridge in accessing his development as a writer in both languages. I look at Peretz's early writing career, in which he was mostly known as a Hebrew poet, and at his 1890's Hebrew poetry, while giving attention to the poetry he was producing during that decade in Yiddish. Poetry in Yiddish was a new medium for Peretz, as was writing in Yiddish altogether. His first ever Yiddish writing debut was the long poem *Monish* (1888). Examining his Yiddish poetry from his radical period, I will ask to what degree this poetry can truly be called radical political poetry.

The last chapter takes a look at Peretz's Hasidic-inspired works in prose, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, and shows how he used the Hasidic metaphor in varied and complex ways. His Hasidic stories were often misunderstood and mistaken as reactionary by orthodox Marxist literary critics. Similarly, his Hasidic stories were often mistakenly viewed by nationalists as simple Jewish folk tales. Both points disregarded first the nuances and development to be found in this body of work. But also, both misinterpretations neglected the socialist core at the heart of many of these stories. In fact, I argue that Peretz's Hasidic work served a utilitarian purpose in forming a mythological base for the Jewish Labor movement and had an important effect on the radical reader. My analysis will also consider additional philosophical influences and esthetic aspects that enrich and inform these stories.

Through my work about Peretz, I hope to give the reader a better understanding of his writings, of his development as a writer, of his flirtations with radical politics, and of his resulting radical literature. I also hope to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the cultural productions which became the cultural foundation of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund in Eastern Europe. But my hope is that my work will also contribute to

scholarship in fields beyond Jewish Studies, by helping to decipher the complex relationship between radical movements and the cultural productions and cultural agents associated with them.

Chapter 1:

Education, Professions, and Literary Proclamations: Peretz between Positivism and Proto-Socialism

Introduction

In his Yiddish essay "*Bildung*" (Education) Peretz puts forth a platform of education and outreach to the Yiddish speaking masses of Eastern Europe. In another Yiddish essay from the same period, entitled "*Iber profesyonen*" (About Professions) he encourages Jews to take on useful modern professions, so they would not be left behind by the social-economic changes that were sweeping Poland at the time. But what he can say in a straight forward manner in his essays receives a more complex nuanced treatment when he produces his major debut in Yiddish prose: the short story "*In postvogn*" (In the Mail-Coach) and his longer work "*Bilder fun a provints rayze*" (Pictures from a Travel Journey). Both these texts by Peretz were published during the years 1890-1891, so they definitely fit together chronologically. But the reason the essays and literature go together in this chapter is not only because they belong to the same time period, but because of thematic and cultural-political reasons. In essence, in these two distinct genres Peretz wrote "Yiddish manifests". In both he wished to elevate the low symbolic status of Yiddish into that of a fine European modern Jewish-national language.

In his essay "*Bildung*" Peretz used Yiddish to write a social-cultural text that could appeal in its language, style, and ideas to the modernizing and urbanizing Jewish youth. In his literature, especially in *Bilder*, the narrative voice belongs strictly to that of the modern man. If his precursors in Yiddish literature, Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem, used literary personas to serve as a bridge between the shtetl-Jews and the modern –Peretz does not require such persona. His Yiddish prose style from its debut on, whether in his stories or in his essays, Peretz excelled in taking the downtrodden "jargon" to places many of the Jewish intelligentsia did not believe it belonged.

These essays and literary work also strongly connect on the ideological level. They both belong to Peretz's phase of transition between positivism and proto-socialism in the early 1890's, when he began to recognize the idea of conflicting class conflict, albeit in a vague way. All of these texts, though in different ways, express his ideological transition, which can be termed his "pre-radical" phase. Examined together, they are key to understanding the formation and the genesis of the "radical Peretz".

Bildung for the Masses, Professions for the Common People

> *Our program is* Bildung*: education; we want to educate our people, turn the fools into smart people, turn the fanatics into educated people, and turn the idle "air swallowers" into workers who are useful and respectable, capable of working for their own good and in this way for the general good. (Peretz, 1891)*

So opens Peretz's essay *Bildung*, which was featured in the Yiddish almanac *Di Yudishe Bibliyotek* of 1891. This almanac and this essay in particular represent an important phase in the creation of a Jewish- bourgeois public sphere in Yiddish, one that aspires to be both

modern and Jewish.[56] This is a new public sphere, in which Jewish intellectuals of all sorts can rationally discuss society's problems, and do so in Yiddish.

Peretz himself imagines his community in progressive terms. Unlike the mainstream Zionist current, he sees the positive effect of exile on the Jewish consciousness. He writes in *Bildung*:

> And because we are in exile…our egoism is the purest human-love! Because we feel that as long as human-love does not prevail, as long as there is jealousy and hatred, as long as there are rivalry and wars, life won't be good for us. For this reason, we constantly seek peace. For this reason, our hearts are like a sponge for all the newest ideas. For this reason, we have a heart, and we have feeling and compassion towards the unfortunate. We share a connection with the expelled and displaced, with the persecuted… for this reason we are "rakhmonim bney rakhmonim", "merciful sons of merciful." *(Ale Verk-vol 8, 4)*

Here Peretz is constructing a Jewish identity founded on the principals of seeking universal social-justice and peace. In his view, progressivism would benefit Jews much more than creating their own army and competing in this world of "rivalry and wars".

This article's focus on education is not innovative, since education was also the focal point of the Jewish Enlightenment (the *Haskala*) that preceded Peretz.[57] But it is innovative in its use of Yiddish as a serious political tool. While he does echo some earlier *maskilic* (of the *Haskala*) perceptions of Yiddish, Peretz exemplifies here, through his own particular use of

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[56]Scott Ury analyzes the development of modern Jewish cultural institutions in early 20th Warsaw under the paradigm of Habermas's notion of the bourgeois public sphere" and B. Anderson's concepts of "print capitalism" and "imagined communities" (Scott, Ury," The Culture of Modern Jewish Politics," in *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry*, Jonathan Frankel, Stefani Hoffman editors. The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010, 151-165). My approach understands Peretz's initiatives and efforts and this essay in particular as a major foundation of these trends.

[57]Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh's (Mendele) first published article was the Hebrew essay "*Mikhtav Al Dvar Ha-Khinukh*" (A Letter Regarding Education). The article focuses on the need for Jewish children to learn Russian and professions. In the article he also suggests that Jewish educators should worry about their own professionalism and about being good teachers before complaining about their unmotivated and underachieving pupils (Shin"yud Ben – Khaim Moshe Abramovitsh, "*Mikhtav Al Dvar Ha-Khinukh*," *Ha-Magid*, July 15th, 1857).

the language, that the Yiddish language is well-equipped for communicating a social-political-cultural manifesto. In so doing, Peretz is effectively setting new standards for the soon-to-emerge Yiddish mass press.

Wasserman writes that *Bildung* was used at first as a tool of social integration, through which the individual could free himself from traditional contexts, from the narrow and limiting confines of local custom, class, economics, and history in order to incorporate himself in a cosmopolitan community with a universal culture. Social advancement was *Bildung*'s source of attraction for Jews, women, and other groups who wished to climb the social ladder.[58]

Within the Hebrew and Yiddish literature of the *Haskala*, the concept of *Bildung* was always used in the meaning of creating, through education, a rational (i.e., modern) individual; a person capable of organizing his life rationally and successfully. Ideally, this individual would also develop moral and aesthetic sensibilities. The concept of *Bildung* that Peretz uses in this Yiddish essay as his centerpiece for Jewish modernity is borrowed directly from the German word *Bildung*. This term carries several meanings. Literally, it means a process of *building* oneself, or self-improvement through culture and education.

In the German context, when the national German culture was in its early stages, (and only a few of the lower classes were exposed to it), amongst the bourgeois adherents of *Bildung* in particular, there was no serious contradiction between pursuing the world of knowledge and the major principles of the Enlightenment. In its early stages, there was no contradiction between the universalist commitment, and the commitment to *Bildung* in the spirit of the new German national culture. But as much as the *Bildung* concept played the role of a catalyst in

[58]See: Wasserman, *Akh germanya heykhan hi?*.

the egalitarian social process, it could also play an opposite role: namely the role of building a social elite to be divided from the masses. In this version, *Bildung* risked presenting the Jews, women, and working people as "others".[59]

Peretz's understanding and use of the *Bildung* concept is revealed in two short paragraphs in "*Bildung*". In the first one he negates what he perceives as a past (i.e. maskilic) conception of *Bildung*. In the second paragraph he offers his "corrected" version of the concept:

> *We want Bildung, but we don't mean the Bildung that people used to speak of. Not a Bildung that fails to develop the heart and the brain, that makes the person not smarter, not better, not more capable, but only leads him astray, that teaches him to kneel and bow, that finely sharpens his little beard and effectively call a dog in several languages.*
> *We mean the Bildung that makes factories, trains, highways; Bildung that teaches you to work for your own benefit and for the benefit of the world, the Bildung that also makes a person honest and good. (Ale Verk, vol 8, 12)*

Peretz is attempting to distinguish what he sees as his broader and deeper version of *Bildung* from what Peretz sees as the superficial *Bildung* of the Jewish Enlightenment. That "old *Bildung"* worried about appearances and concerned itself with useless diversions such as the study of languages for their own sake. Peretz presents instead a *Bildung* which is more practical (since it is better suited to the demands of the job market), more beneficial for society (since it is concerned with infrastructure), and more ethical (since it is concerned with how people treat each other). This last point –the search for a more ethical implementation of Enlightenment ideas—is an expression of the proto-socialist direction being taken by Peretz.

Peretz wants to negate the exclusive, individualistic, and narrow bourgeois meanings of *Bildung*, and instead to redefine it to include broader social groups, "the people". His version

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[59]Idem.

of *Bildung* resonates with the Warsaw Positivism strand of thinking with its emphasis on cultural and economic development (see Introduction), and it echoes the democratic educational tradition of Rousseau.[60]

In "*Bildung*" Peretz uses the plural "we", as if a real group of people is standing behind his project. This conceit is wishful thinking by Peretz, for at the time he had no real following. Even if by "we" he meant the collective of Yiddish writers, his mini-manifesto still would have applied to only to a very small group of people. One of his few readers, fellow writer and future collaborator Dovid Pinski wrote of Peretz:

> *In his article Bildung he addressed "all honest educated persons" to help educate the people. He called on them to return to their people, whom they had abandoned. He wanted them to come and help bring his version of Bildung to the people. It seems to me that his call did not reach any further than my circle of people in Vitebsk. No one responded from anywhere, and nothing began to happen.*[61]

Pinski touches here on the tensions and problems inherent in the project of bringing together conceptual innovations and outreach to the "common people." Only a handful of people were willing to sign up for Peretz's plan.

The article *Bildung* is sealed by the open wish that "the main thing that ought to be seen, as much as possible, is that the people should have a livelihood…"[62]; emphasizing a central feature of the Haskala of the "productivization" of the Jews. Those typically Peretzian three dots segue to another major article by Peretz at the time, entitled *About professions*.

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[60]Rousseau is mentioned once in the article when Peretz is confronting his futuristic vision of "back to innocence" with Isaiah's "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge… nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."(Isaiah 2:4)

[61]In: Dovid Pinski, "*Dray Yor mit Peretz*," *Di Goldene Keyt*, Vol. 8 (1951).

[62] It should be noted that this message – of first fixing the economy, and only later addressing other issues such as one's proper social behavior and conduct – can be found all over the Haskala literature, especially since the 1860's. See for example chapter 15 in Abramovitsh's *Susati* (My Horse, *Di Kliyatshe* in Yiddish).

Taking on the Modern Job Market: *Iber Profesyonen*

> *The Jewish professions at times are so specialized, that their equal in the 21st century would be that when one specialist would lift up the upper eyebrow, the second would push down the bottom one and a third would examine the infected eye. (Peretz, 1891)*[63]

In the article *About Professions* (1891), Peretz follows the modern agenda of making Jews "productive". He writes about how Eastern European Jews need to acquire productive occupations in order to extricate themselves from the poverty they were experiencing at the time. In order to advance, he argued, they would need to integrate themselves in the modern industrial production process. Historically, because Jews could not own land, they were occupied as artisans, craftsmen, traders of goods and in general the manufacturing of finished goods (like tailoring) as opposed to producing raw material. These occupations were increasingly becoming outmoded due to new methods of production. In this article, Peretz focuses on how Jews can adapt to industrialization in Poland. The initiative to write this article came from Peretz's Jewish Positivist circle of the time.

Peretz focuses on productive industrial capital as a feature of the new economy. He describes the changes that capitalism brought to Eastern Europe, which among other things included the terrible poverty industrialization brought for Jews. The traditional occupations of the Jews were dying out. In particular, roles of commercial middle-men (who served as traders between farmers and landowners) and of craftsmen were less in demand due to improvements in transportation and manufacturing:

> *Only this is certain, that a time is coming, when all middle-men will fall away, all occupations which don't produce, which don't increase and don't process the product – will be forgotten, three quarters of*

[63]I.L. Peretz, *Iber profesyonen* (Yiddish) (Warsaw: Halter and Eisenshtat, 1894 (second edition). The first edition came out as a supplement to the first volume of *Di yudishe bibliyotek*.

> *Jewish professions will fall away and all must start to produce, to practice craftsmanship, to work in the factories. (*Iber profesyonen*, 14)*

In his line of argument, Peretz stressed the sayings in traditional Jewish sources that he though could be helpful in promoting his agenda. In this way, Peretz did not deviate at all from the *Haskala* literature that preceded him. *Haskala* literature repeatedly cited the numerous places in the Talmud and in *Midrash* that speak in praise of craftsmanship and craftsmen. At the same period, Peretz also compiled a booklet about the cholera epidemic, based on German and other sources. As with most of these popular-science booklets he compiled, Peretz tries to show how most of the hygiene rules already have a basis in ancient Jewish tradition.[64] He uses traditional Jewish sources and language to promote his strictly modern ideology, as in the following passage from *Iber profesyonen*:

> *The Talmud for example had perceived artisans in a different way: "whoever doesn't teach his son a craft, is like he taught him theft!" "Great is the craft, it gives the person respect!" "Love the craft and hate the rabbinate"! "The Torah can't exist without the craft!"*

The few words shown here are enough to prove that past generations had praise for those who work with their own hands not with someone else's. (*Iber profesyonen*, 4)

A nationalist rather than *maskilic* attitude comes into play in this text in light of the fact that a significant part of the essay is devoted to distinguishing between the Christian worker and the Jewish worker. These parts of the essay are built on well-known stereotypes of Christians and Jews that Peretz adapts for his purposes. Peretz writes that while the Christian worker divides

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[64]M. Khmelnitski , "Y.L. Perets' popular-meditsinishe broshur: Az me vil nisht, shtarbt nisht fun kholi-ra," *Yivo Bleter*: 28 (Fall 1946), 146-152. Peretz's advisor on these issues was Josef Kirshrot (1843-1906), who used to work for Jan Bloch, and was an attorney in Warsaw. Kirshrot was the founder of the first Jewish workmen's-association (Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 210).

his hours in an organized fashion between work and rest, "You [the Jews] do not," he accuses his readers.[65] But nevertheless, in his stereotypical analysis, Jews do possess many advantages in comparison with a Christian worker:

> 1. *You drink less!*
> 2. *You are (in the provinces) more educated, in any case all of you can pray, a lot. You can write a bit, you come out, if not from kheyder[66], in any case from a talmetoyre[67].*
> 3. *You are more easy-going; more relaxed, and live better with your family. (Iber profesyonen, 22)*

Peretz's assertion that a Jewish worker has a better family life than his Christian counterpart stems from the stereotype of the gentile working man who comes home drunk and is violent towards his wife.[68] Though most of these ethnic stereotypes are elastic and change with time, some remain fixed. One example of the latter, according to Peretz, is the grave advantage that Christian workers possess against their Jewish counterparts: their love of work for its own sake as opposed to the Jewish affection for money. Peretz writes:

> *A Christian worker loves his occupation, you work for the most part to get time off, to get the task over with; you never have in your mind the work but your earnings; you barely have a bit of money and you*

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[65]It is interesting that Perez does not mention here the Jewish day of rest, the Sabbath. This fact might be indicative of the fact that Peretz is hiding some objective obstacles (the different day of rest) to the full incorporation of Jews inside the work force. Acknowledging this difference undercuts his message aimed at Jews correcting *their* way and discussing *their* responsibilities towards self improvement.

[66]Traditional school for young Jewish males.

[67]A kind of Jewish religious elementary school for the poor.

[68]"The drunken *goyishe* peasants we [Jews)] would never want to be like" – quoted by the Yiddish writer Abraham Shulman, referring to the social construct of the shtetl. In the context of the book it is referring to question of how to save Yiddish and the need to reconstruct the shtetl in order to do so (Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: the Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (United States: Basic Books, 2004), 363). Another example is the Hebrew poem by Bialik "Jacob and Esau" (1922). Each stanza alternates between depicting the negative drunken *goy* ("To drink he must\ For that what makes him a *goy*") and the pious Jew ("Wakes up early to pray\ Gives his creator praise and glory."). See: Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Ha-Shirim*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Or Yehudah, lsr., 2004), 437. Bialik's poem was revived also as a pop song in modern Israel by the popular Israeli singer Arik Einstein.

work less; you get a lot of money, you throw away your craft and become merchants, saloon owners and the like...

*People say "Jews are thieves"; that is totally true; as much as a Jew steals money from himself, a Greek and a gypsy don't steal from one another…our craftsman have unfortunately a very bad name, and not for nothing you earn such a name! (*Iber profesyonen, *22-31)*

Ironically, Peretz's expedition to the provinces revealed facts that would dispel such accusations towards Jews as lazy, unproductive money-lovers, but still he repeats these negative stereotypes against Jews in his own writings. These are the kinds of charges one often hears leveled against underprivileged minorities by voices coming out of the dominant group, though at times echoed by voices of "collaborators" within the minority. In an environment in which Jews compete against non-Jews, such propaganda against Jewish labor is to be expected from the non-Jewish majority. Peretz is not immune from this negative stereotyping against Jews. He lays forth points to which "we need to aspire":

1. *Our craftsmen should better learn their craft.*
2. *Our craftsman should work on time, regularly, he should eat, drink, and sleep on time, thus he will be healthy and fresh at work, he will enjoy it, get a good taste of it, and really earn.*
3. *Our craftsman should be, as much as possible, not a merchant, not a broker; his work should be indoors, not in the streets; he should not have to eat and drink in pubs. His livelihood should become a respectable livelihood; the customer should come to his home, and seek him out.*
4. *Our craftsman should be an honest man, his word should be solid, a deadline – a deadline, the competition of one against the other should be honest, not deceiving, not based only on how best to fool the customer!...(Iber profesyonen, 43).*

Jewish workers have a lot to improve according to Peretz. He refers in this essay, particularly in this passage, to the importance of working *regelmesik*, that is, regularly. Everything needs to be done in its proper time, in an orderly way, and divided into distinct categories (the craftsman should not be a merchant for example). Basically this is an "organic work" kind of rhetoric, an echo of the Warsaian Positivism dressed in Jewish clothing. He talks about the

economy of the provinces (where he visited) in contrast to the big city where he recently took up residence.

A major innovation here is his anaphoric usage of the phrase "*unzer baalmelokhe zol zayn*", "our craftsman should be". This line connects the plural possessive "our" with a working people's occupation of "craftsman" and the pedagogical "should be". This combination tells us a great deal and perhaps sums up where Peretz was socially and intellectually at the time. He is showing concern for the status of Jewish workers and transitioning between positivism and proto-socialism, but he is still echoing the voice of his benefactor, the mega-industrialist Jan Bloch. When he terms “our workers” he might mean “workers of the Jewish people”, but in practice it still means Jewish workers owned by a Jewish capitalist, or in other words “Jan Bloch's workers”.

Peretz's Yiddish Literary Proclamations of the Early 1890's: In Postvogn and Bilder fun a Provints Rayze

How does Peretz embody in his own literary creations the socio-political and linguistic theories that he put forth in his essays? How do they serve, or perhaps contradict, his essays? How does Peretz's artistic voice differ from his essayistic one? The short story *In postvogn* and the longer *Bilder fun a provints rayze* are Peretz's first major Yiddish literary achievements in prose, and thus give us a platform to grapple with the pre-radical Peretz. One important distinction is that while Peretz emphasized functionality and the usefulness of writing to Yiddish for spreading modern ideas in his essay *Bildung*, his use of Yiddish in an artistic medium dispels by its very definition any reductionary argument of using Yiddish strictly for its "usefulness". These two Yiddish "literary milestones" will be the focus of the remaining of the chapter.

In Postvogn: Imagining the National-Feminist and creating a new path for Yiddish Literature

Three Yiddish Literatures

The short story *In postvogn* (In The Mail Coach, 1890) is Peretz's declaration of the new Yiddish literature he wished to establish. Peretz put forward his text as an alternative to the dominant popular "trashy" literature of the period known as *shund*. Like his contemporary, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz believed that Yiddish literature needed to be "saved" from the vulgarity of the time. Sholem Aleichem accused the popular literature of not being truly representative of Jewish life and not sufficiently concerned with the fate of the Jews. Peretz's focus on the agenda of the Jewish people would also distinguish it from the mainstream popular literature of his time, though in a different way than Sholem Aleichem's.

In its early stages of development as a literary language, there were three distinct "Yiddish literatures", each deserving of discussion. All three "new Yiddish literatures" opposed each other and competed for the title of "the innovator" or "the new":

First, there was the popular new Yiddish literature which started in the early 1880's. It is best exemplified by the sensationalist novels of the highly productive Shomer (Nokhem-Meyer Shaykevits, 1849-1905)and by the writer Oyzer Bloshteyn (1840–1898), whose great commercial success marks the emergence in Yiddish of what Anderson terms "print capitalism".[69]

Second, there is Sholem Aleichem's idea of *shtetl* literature and of what a Jewish novel should be. According to Sholem Aleichem, who was inventing his version of a Yiddish canon

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[69]See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

in his almanac *Yudishe folksbibliyotek* along with authors such as Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh (1835-1917), Joel Linetsky (1839-1916), and Yankev Dinezon (1856-1919)[70], a Jewish novel should reject the romantic which he considered to be foreign to Jewish life. Furthermore, good literature, as was the convention in the Russian literary circles which influenced Sholem Aleichem, should realistically depict society and reject the fantastical. It should let the common Jew speak without morally judging his behavior.[71]

Peretz's new literature was another kind of strain of "new Yiddish literature", namely a Yiddish literature targeted at the Jewish intelligentsia. Peretz innovates by placing the modern man's individual consciousness and psyche at the forefront of his narrative voice. He highlights modern man's inability to communicate with Jewish masses from the *shtetls*, underlining the distance from country life and setting himself apart from Sholem Aleichem. With his mentoring, many new talents in Yiddish literature followed his modernist lead, amongst the most distinguished of them are Hersh Dovid Nomberg (1876-1927), and Sholem Asch (1880-1957).

Peretz's Stylistic Proclamation

In his fiction, Peretz eliminates the distance between his own position, which is firmly planted in modernity, and the position of his narrative voice, which is explicitly urban. In other words, Peretz *internalizes modern consciousness*. In contrast, Sholem Aleichem and S.Y. Abramovitsh though they were both modern city people fluent in the state language (Polish or Russian), made a deliberate choice to narrate their fiction through the voice of small-town Yiddish speaking Jews. The appearance of modern characters in modern Jewish

[70]See Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, 28-32.

[71]See more in Jeremy Dauber's biography of Sholem Aleichem: Jeremy Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye* (New York: Schocken, 2013).

literature was already common in Peretz's time but Peretz's modern man is not merely one character who is part of a panoramic, literary representation of Jewish society, but rather he is the absolute dominant voice both outside and inside the narration. Caplan accurately describes Peretz's situation, when he writes that:

> *Peretz paradoxically internalizes modern consciousness at the moment that he renounces the maskilic ideology of modernization. Such internalization is characteristic of a later phase in modernity than preceding Yiddish literature and therefore explains why Peretz dispenses with previous narrative strategies that masked the estrangement of the traditional and the modern. Estrangement for Peretz no longer stands in the way of a modernizing program but functions instead as the central concern of his incipient modernism.*[72]

Sholem Aleichem and Peretz both resisted the dominance of *shund*. In *Postvogn*, Peretz derides this form of popular literature as "interesting stories". By distancing themselves from the popular literature, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz each carved out their own literary path. This essential literary battle also reflected their desire "to get a piece of the action" as producers of Yiddish culture in a rapidly expanding Yiddish literary market, in which Shomer, was by far the bestselling author.[73]

Sholem Aleichem famously waged an open war against the most successful *shund* writer of his time, Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch, better known by his pen name, Shomer. Sholem Aleichem even wrote a pamphlet entitled *Shomer's mishpet* (Shomer's Trial) in which he attacked Shaykevitch's works for being, "ignorantly composed, poorly constructed, highly repetitious, morally bankrupt, and plagiarized from foreign sources".[74] In addition, both

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[72]Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," 71.

[73]A great source for the state of the Yiddish book market can be found in the second volume of Sholem Aleichem's almanac *Di yudishe folksbibliyotek* (1889). It gives a list of all the Yiddish books that were printed that year.

[74]Dauber, Jeremy. 2010. Shomer. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shomer (accessed April 1, 2013). For an elaborate treatment of

Sholem Aleichem and Peretz agreed that the elitist literature of the period (mostly in Hebrew) needed to be confronted as well, for the Hebrew literature at the time addressed an exclusively male and maskilic elite.[75]

The Yiddish literary market was still far from reaching its full potential - ("three million people live in it {Yiddish})"[76], wrote Peretz at the time. And just to give an illustration of the scope of this market in 1889, Sholem Aleichem's almanac that came out at the same year tells us that Abramovitsh sold 5,000 copies of his novels *Di kliyatche*, Sholem Aleichem sold 4,100 copies of his novel *Stempenyu* and Shomer sold a record of 96,000 copies of his 35 titles! In 1889, Peretz already had major plans for entering the Yiddish literary market, which he elaborated in his correspondence with Sholem Aleichem, but his plans had not yet materialized.

The State of the Nation on the Road

In Postvogn is a combination of two stories that are told inside a mail coach. The spatial setting of *In postvagon* inside a mail-coach signifies movement and communication; a perfect place for new encounters between people. The narrator listens in turn to the stories of his two travelling companions. As an active listener who shares his own impressions with the readers,

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Shomer's work and the polemic over it, see: Sophie Grace-Pollack, "Shomer in the Light of *Shomer's mishpet* ('Shomer's Judgement') (Hebrew)," *Khulyot* 5 (1998), 109-159. The full text of *Shomer's mishpet* was translated into English by Justin Cammy in: Justin Cammy, Dara Horn, Alyssa Quint, and Rachel Rubinstein (eds.), *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University, 2008), 129-188).

[75]Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Waltham, 2004), 169. More about Peretz's Hebrew work in chapters 3-5. See also in chapter 3 his views towards the direction Hebrew literature should go.

[76]"Hebrew we have to know as Jews, but – as educated people, as living people, we must know the state language." ("Bildung," Ale Verk, vol8, 11).

the narrator becomes more than an impartial, passive observer. In fact, he plays an active role in the stories of both men.

A short Hebrew story by Abramovitsh from the same year, entitled "Shem and Japheth on the Train" ("*Shem ve-Yefet ba-'agala*,", 1890)[77] takes place in a similar setting. The listener-character in Abramovitsh's story, Mendele, listens to the story of Moyshe the tailor while spending a train ride together. The opening of the story discusses at length difference between the days of the cart ("a small colony") and the busy rail-road trains ("a traveling city"). Like *In Postvagon*, Moyshe's story deals with Jewish and gentile relations during the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. But, as we shall soon see, if Peretz's characters are utterly modern and middle class, than Abramovitsh focuses on the low socio-economic strata. Both his characters, one a Jewish tailor, the other a Polish-gentile cobbler, start off, as in *Postvogn*, on a friendly basis. As immigrants in Prussia, they were both driven away by the Prussian government, but not at the same time. The Jewish character was driven away before the gentile. In retrospect, this contributed to the fact that for a period of time, the gentile character was himself carried away by the anti-Semitic rhetoric that helped carry out the campaign of deporting the Jews from Prussia. The two characters eventually team up again in Poland and bury the hatchet between them, the gentile even becoming a close family friend of the Jew. The story suggests that solidarity between Jews and non-Jews is can be based shared poverty and misery. The story also suggests that in the misery department, gentiles have something to learn from the Jewish experience of exile, and reminds the readers that the seven laws of Noah (the seven laws in Jewish tradition that apply to non-Jews) apply to them too.

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[77]First published in *Kaveret Kovetz Sifruti* (Odessa, 1890), p. 45-59.

Like Abramovitsh, but unlike the listener-character in Sholem Aleichem's more famous Railroad Stories which were written about twenty years after *In Postvogn* – Peretz's listener plays an active role in the story. Both Peretz's and Abramovitsh's listeners sometimes function as intermediates of the storyteller, asking leading questions and drawing "proper" conclusions from the two stories. In contrast, Sholem Aleichem's listener is just that: a listener. However, an important distinction to be made in that Abramovitsh's listener is a book-trader and only semi-modern in his consciousness, whereas Peretz's listener is a modern fiction writer. In addition, while in both cases the listeners have an emotional reaction to the stories they listen to, Peretz's listener has an even more intense emotional involvement in the plot (he is a former friend of the second storyteller), while no such relation exists in Abramovitsh's "Shem and Japheth on the Train".

In the first monologue within the *Postvogn*, the companion traveler is a traditional Jewish man, Haim, who gives an account of his relationship with his wife. He tells the narrator how his wife complains to him of her boredom and her desire to read and to educate herself. "Polish, German… let it be Yiddish; main thing is to read…"[78], Haim relates her request. He views her complaints as a sign of idleness, an idleness he claims is actually a privilege which traditional Jewish men do not share because they are constantly occupied with the study of holy books. Through the study of holy books written in Aramaic and in Hebrew Jewish men in Eastern Europe increased their own status, (their symbolic capital), while preventing women (who were mostly literate only in Yiddish) from having access to this knowledge.

The story seems to protest against the inferior status of Jewish women compared with that of Jewish men, but the producers of modern Jewish knowledge in the story, including modern

[78]Ale verk, vol 2, 72; *The I. L Peretz Reader*, 105.

Yiddish literature, which is accessible to women, are still exclusively Jewish men. "The obligation of every Yiddish [male] writer"[79] according to the story is to include Jewish women in his targeted audience. What comes out of this conversation between two males is that the status of Jewish women is an issue to be discussed between Jewish men, but the women here, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, are present only as "symbolic means in the policies of men".[80]

In the second story we find out that even this limited feminist agenda is restricted to Jewish women who remain within the imagined collective, within "the Jewish people"; the plight of non-Jewish women is irrelevant. The narrator is concerned with the Jewish woman who moves outside of the "Jewish collective", as the victim of a demonic seduction by a non-Jew. This concern is a progressive disguise for the very well-known chauvinistic and ethno-centric goal of "'protecting the nation's women from abusive foreign men", a view that both Peretz and Sholem Aleichem expressed in their writings. In these stories, gender equality can only be truly realized, and is conditioned upon, promoting the unifying nationalist agenda but not challenging the gender division of labor at its base: that is, the economic inequality resulting from women being excluded from the modern labor force or, if they enter it, earning lower wages in comparison with men.[81]

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[79]Ale verk, vol 2, 75; *The I. L Peretz Reader*, 111.

[80]Pierre Bourdieu**,** *La Domination Masculine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), Hebrew translation: Avner Lahav (2007), intro: Gisele Sapiro, p. 16.

[81] Meaning, the lower wages that women make in comparison with men. This disparity supposedly developed in the industrialized world on the assumption that men should earn more because they support women and children (what is called "family wages"). See Irene Padavic and Barbara F. Reskin, *Women and Men at Work* (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

The first monologue highlights the case of a woman who wants to study, which, if it were permitted, would weaken the internal boundaries between the genders, and as a consequence, promote national unity between Jewish men and Jewish women. Contemporary popular Yiddish literature, Peretz tells us, fails to serve as a nationalizing tool for Jews, for it does not meet the needs of Jewish male readers. It literally puts them to sleep according to the narrator in the story. In reality, Jewish men enjoyed reading Yiddish sentimental novels, but viewed doing so as an insignificant distraction or entertainment.[82] Presumably, if women were educated, men and women could both enjoy a higher literature, building a common bond that would foster the nationhood of the Jewish people and dissolve boundaries within the Jewish community.

The second monologue aims to define the Jew in contrast to the non-Jew by using a Jewish woman's story to define the outer boundaries which distinguish the Jewish nation from the Christian one.

Both stories are firmly set within the Polish national boundaries and defined by the Polish public sphere in which they take place. This fact is crucial, since it delineates the particular brand of Diaspora nationalism that Peretz was developing, namely a reality in which both the Jew and the non-Jew speak the same language (they converse in Polish in the second segment), share the same mail-coaches, and share a common history. If minor differences are present from time to time, it does not amount to a total Jewish divorce from Poland, as Zionist thinkers and writers often postulated.[83] In order to create a sense of Jewish national

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[82]Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 145-146.

[83]Take such Hebrew writers as Brenner, Luidoer, and Smilansky, who at the beginning of the 20th century made the concept of "negation of exile" (including a negation of Jewish living in Poland), into a central theme in their writings, "portraying the Jews' exilic condition as a national pathology… The negation of exile {is} the pinnacle

community in the first monologue, Peretz used two Jewish characters: Haim, the traditional husband who tells his story and a listener-character who is a non-orthodox, modern man. Peretz creates a situation in which a conversation between two Jews who are strangers can take place naturally without further justification than that they both belong to the same (Jewish) nation and are sitting together in the mail coach, as is humorously exemplified in this opening segment. Here, the listener-character tells about his swift introduction to Haim, and how the latter distinguishes himself from his assimilated relatives:

> *He told me everything at once, in a single breath; within minutes I learned that his name is Haim, that he is Yona Hrubeshover's son-in-law, Berl Konskivoler's son, and that the wealthy Merenstein from Lublin is related to him, an uncle on his mother's side. This uncle of his, has almost a goyish household; non-kosher food he doesn't know if people eat there, but eating without washing first – he saw it for himself. (Ale verk, vol 2, p. 67;* The I. L Peretz Reader, *104-105)*[84]

In contrast, in the second story, Peretz stresses the Jewish character's prior relationship with Janek Polniewski (a non-Jewish name which is a Polish version of Joe Smith or the Hebrew *ploni-almoni*) which was a prerequisite to a meaningful conversation developing between the two characters who come from different segments of society. In an age of increasing ethnic tensions, a Jew and a non-Jew had to be represented as alien to each other, an image which is only strengthened by the fact that these two foreigners were in fact childhood friends, as we learn in the opening lines of the second segment:

> *Another passenger joined me in the coach; and in the morning light, not only could I see him clearly, but I even recognized him. He was an old acquaintance. As children we used to slide on the ice together and often played at making mud pies; we were kind of buddies. Later, I went to the filthy and*

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of Zionist ideology", taken from: Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 45.

[84]All translations from the Yiddish are done by Adi Mahalel. I will also give the relevant reference to the full version of the story in English translation: I. L. Peretz**,** "In the Mail Coach", trans. Golda Werman, in *The I. L Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), pp. 104-118.

dark Jewish religious school, the kheyder, and he went to the bright and emancipated gymnasium…Polniewski recognized me and embraced me, but before I even had time to speak with him, he immediately asked what I thought of the vile anti-Semitism…(Ale verk vol2, 75-6; Reader, 111-112).

This second conversation justifies the first one's quest for inner unification (modern Jews and orthodox Jews, and male Jews with female Jews) because it explores the difficulty of reaching outside the "imagined community".[85] The somewhat ironic tone of the first segment (the Haim segment), is replaced by a harsher, more dramatic one in the second segment (the Janek segment; though it shows irony in the depiction of the schools). In the first segment, humor portrays problems inside the nation as solvable, as not too terrible, but as issues that can be conquered by a smile. In sharp contrast, the borderline violent tone of the second segment implies that issues between Jew and non-Jew are bitter and difficult to resolve.

There is some criticism of Haim for not showing enough national social solidarity (he refuses to visit his poorer relatives) and instead he cares more about keeping religious customs (eating Kosher, hand washing before a meal) than he does about his fellow Jews. These are the typical criticisms for a secular-nationalist (the narrator) to make of a more religious and traditional counterpart. The special setting of the story in a mail coach, a secular public space, is designed to put the modern writer in a superior position in relation to his more religiously observant traveling companion.

The polarity between the new secular-national Jew versus the old religious Jew is depicted as being relatively mild, compared with the polarity between Jews and non-Jews. But the intra-

[85]The latter term was coined by Anderson strictly for modern nationalist communities, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. I argue that there was already an emerging modern imagined Jewish community at the time, growing side by side with the Yiddish press in Eastern Europe and oversees (and an already established Hebrew press).

national tension is no less vital in constructing the modern imagined community than the inter-national tension. In fact, it reveals an inner power struggle within the Jewish community for leadership, which is more than just a crisis of mediation between the modern and the traditional spheres as suggested by Caplan.[86]

The stress on common language and costumes, which existed amongst east-European Jewry in the form of Yiddish and the Jewish religion, weaves a common thread between urban middle-class Jews (and high-class Jews) with the impoverished Jews of the little towns. The implication is that there is a "we", a united group comprised of different Jewish classes involved in a single national project. The class system is not challenged here, but rather restructured with the mediating help of the intelligentsia.[87]

To overcome the inherent tension created by conflicting class interests, Peretz adds an interior monologue of the narrator. In this interior monologue, he expresses some bewilderment about how his fellow passenger, Haim, recognized him as being Jewish, despite his modern appearance: "…until today I don't know how he recognized me as a Jew…perhaps I gave a Jewish groan? Perhaps he felt that my groan and his groan are one groan?" (*Ale verk* vol2, 68; *Reader*, 105).

Haim and the narrator share another exchange concerning the "ethnic attributes" of Jews that cannot simply be hidden by a change of clothing. This time it is Haim who is bewildered to discover that his travel companion is a writer. "From this you make a living?", he asks. I answer a truly Jewish answer: "Feh!"; and shortly thereafter Haim asks rhetorically "What

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[86]See: Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," 68.

[87]See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 82.

doesn't a Jew do for the sake of making a living?" (*Ale Verk, vol2*, 69; *Reader*, 106). His response is meant to show how natural it is for Jews to worry about their livelihood.

The humor functions here to suggest that a shared peoplehood exists. Humor serves as a naturalizing tool of nationalist ideology. This motif of Jews being recognized as Jews even if they wear modern clothing, which plays a very strong part in Peretz's *Bilder fun a provints rayze* (1891), is a tool in the production of a modern Jewish identity in which one to whom *dos pintele yid* (the "little Jewish dot"[88]) is an organic part of his biological being.

Storytelling

> *"*Az me zol shraybn emes falt im gornisht ayn*" ("That one writes the truth, doesn't occur to him at all") ((Peretz,* In Postvogn*)*

The humor of the story also helps grapple with cultural-political questions, including the social status of the writer. Through its dual-monologue format, *In Postvogn* poses aesthetic questions of representation, narration, and the profession of the fiction writer. A major duality presented in the story is the one between high-minded modern literature ("Peretzian" literature) versus popular and "interesting" low-brow (trashy) literature, a literature that (unlike Peretz's) actually sells.

Here, the listener character (who is also a writer), considers how he could adapt a story from Haim's oral *mayse* to a written one that people would actually read:

> *...I must admit, he began to interest me. A story about a young man from a small town, and his bride who was raised in Warsaw and who detests the small town…something might come out of this, I think. I must get more details, add something of my own to the plot, and I will have a novel. I will put in a*

[88]The Yiddish expression "dos pintele yid" refers to the most basic point of identity of a Jew. It is based on the mystical assumption that all Jews have an inherent common 'Jewish quality', regardless of their degree of piety.

convicted robber, mix in a few bankruptcies, throw in a dragon for good measure; this way I will also be interesting. (Ale verk, vol 2, 68; Reader, 106).

This quote is a pungent mockery of the popular Yiddish novels of the period, books like Shomer's novel "Half Man, Half Monkey" of 1888.This criticism is curious in light of the fact that Peretz himself never wrote a whole novel. In that sense he is also making fun of a genre that he never mastered (though he didn't yet know it at the time he wrote *In Postvogn*), trying perhaps to attribute to it –or at least to the Yiddish novels – a low artistic value. The novel here is depicted as a low-brow, popular genre which the Peretzian character (the listener) may look down upon and mock.

Peretz is echoing here Sholem Aleichem's critique of the Yiddish novel and his demand for a more "Jewish realistic" novel. According to Sholem Aleichem's interpretation, a realistic Jewish novel would require toning down a central element common to the romantic genre: the erotic theme.[89]

At this time, Peretz was not aiming to be "interesting" to the masses. Instead, his primary target was the modernizing Jews from small towns – in practice all men, not women who were reading Yiddish literature thus far,[90] which was mostly shund. *Peretz's goal, which he expressed explicitly in his essays of the same period, is to inspire modern Jewish men to serve as a national Jewish intelligentsia. Peretz strove to appeal to the masses, by inspiring them to reach higher, not by "stooping" to their level. This is in contrast to Sholem Aleichem who wrote in 1889 that he writes for the*

[89]See Sholem Aleichem's introduction to his 1888 novel "*Stempenyu*" in the first volume of his almanac "*Di yudishe folks-biliyotek*".

[90]See Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 126-132.

> *common people and about the common people, and only gradually could a high brow Yiddish literature be established.*[91]

Throughout the conversation with Haim the tension between the writer's desire to be widely-read and his desire to produce work that is meaningful because it succeeds in delivering new aesthetic and political ideas to the people shines through. On the one hand there are the "interesting" novels, and the need to make a living (Haim is certain he won the lottery if he can devote his time to think of stories), and on the other hand there is the voice of the modern intellectual who looks at it all with a clear sense of irony ("I will also be interesting"). Peretz would solve these inconsistent goals in his later socialist writing, in which, I believe he successfully combined accessibility and popularity with a meaningful progressive political agenda.

The concept of literature, according to Terry Eagleton, is itself a 19th century concept in the sense of being synonymous with the "imaginative". He writes:

> *It is only with what we call now 'the Romantic period' that our own definitions of literature began to develop. The modern sense of the word 'literature' only really gets under way in the nineteenth century. Literature in this sense of the word is an historically recent phenomenon …by the time of the Romantic period, literature was becoming virtually synonymous with the 'imaginative'…the word 'imaginative' contains an ambiguity suggestive of this attitude: it has a resonance of the descriptive term 'imaginative', meaning 'literally untrue', but is also of course an evaluative term, meaning 'visionary' or 'inventive'.*[92]

It is clear that Peretz rejects the first meaning of the term "imaginative" (untrue) but fully embraces the latter (visionary and inventive) and suggests that, unlike his own works, the

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[91]Sholem Aleichem, "*A briv tsu a gutn fraynd*," {A Letter to a Good Friend} (Yiddish) In *Di yudishe folks-bibliotek* 2 (Kiev, 1889), 307-308.

[92]Terry Eagelton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 16.

popular novels of his time lack any real vision or inventiveness . Eagleton writes about the rise of English literature and his claims are necessarily universally applicable. However, since England was the economic center of the world at the time, since it makes an appearance in the story, and since it is discussed in another one of his short stories from the same period[93] – we can assume that Peretz understood England's cultural centrality as well: Haim trades eggs that he buys in Polish villages that move through Lublin and end up in London, where Haim doubtfully comments "people say that there [the eggs] are put in kilns and out of them come chickens...it has to be a lie. The English must very simply love eggs." (*Ale verk*, vol 2, 67; *Reader*, 105).

This new concept called "literature" still must be explained to everyday people like Haim, just like the concept of "incubators". As Haim is skeptical about the level of England's technological development, he also does not comprehend the concept of literature and its value. Haim asks: "What are the stories good for, for the public? What's the point of them? What do people write in those little books?" (*Ale Verk - vol2*, 69; *Reader*, 107).

Haim's imaginative solution to the problem of "literature" is to feminize it. He claims it is "solely his wife" who is interested in literature out of boredom because she does not work outside the home or study. Thus the gender division of labor results in a cultural division of labor: the woman does everything at home and reads literature, and the man is occupied outside the home, be it with work or study. Out of this cultural split, which both Peretz and Sholem Aleichem attributed to Shomer and to his "unmanly novels"[94], Peretz aspires to

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[93]See Peretz's Yiddish story *Mendel Braynes* that came out in 1891 in the second volume of the almanac *Di yudishe bibliyotek* (*In Postvagon* appeared in its first volume). See Ale verk, vol 2, 88-89.

[94]As Sholem Aleichem writes about Shomer in "*Shomer's mishpet*", see N74 in this chapter.

develop his own concept of the new Jewish literature for Yiddish readers regardless of their gender.

Haim's wife can read several European languages as well as Yiddish. If she is not able to satisfy her cultural needs within a Jewish language, there is fear that a strong cultural force will distance her from her tribe. Consequently, the fate of the Jewish nation is dependent upon the development of modern Yiddish literature – a literature that can interest both Jewish men (who are somewhat educated in traditional Jewish texts) and Jewish women (who are well-read in modern European literature). But if the "Jewish genders" can potentially become united under one Yiddish roof, this is naturally not the case for the outsider gentile, liberal as he may be. Liberal values of the pre-nationalist era are put also to the test in this story.

Liberalism Revised

The Pole and the Jew share a past which includes *"lezen*"-texts of science and western classical literature during the period when Warsaw Positivism dominated the intellectual scene (1860's-1880's). Peretz's Jewish writer gives us a glimpse into his state of mind as he reminisces about his optimistic childhood plans and dreams:"I wanted to invent such a gun powder that would shoot really far, for hundreds of miles, for example:– a balloon, to fly up to the stars, so that we could introduce order there too." (*Ale verk*, vol 2, 75; *Reader*, 111). This short quote reveals in just a few words another, darker side of liberalism: the motivation to produce technologically advanced means of destruction alongside a desire for colonial-expansion in order to bring "order" to the natives.

> *If there is a nostalgic tone to this story of the past it is delivered with a dose of Irony. Because at the present new fears preoccupy the rising bourgeois class, fears about the rumblings of the uncontrolled masses as the feudal means of control crumble. As the writer sees this theory of history, the rising industrial classes will need to find new methods for ruling the masses – the irrational human animal: There are two kinds of periods in history: sometimes the best and the brightest person leads the*

> *masses, and – sometimes the masses drag the best and the brightest people down. …At times, the leader of the masses is a Columbus, who searches on behalf of humanity for a new fortune, a new America. But then as soon as bread and water become scarce, the ship-slaves rebel and they lead! First someone must be slaughtered, both to eat his meat and in order to still the fury…(*Ale verk, *vol 2, 77;* Reader, *112-113)*

This text reflects a society at a crossroads: its liberal values are being put to the test. We must remember that in Poland since 1863, liberalism was not merely a plan for economic practice, but also a promise that if such plans were adopted, a new era of universal prosperity and harmony would arrive.[95]

An era of prosperity did come and by the end of the nineteenth century, Congress Poland was the most economically developed part of the Russian Empire,[96] but its gains were concentrated in the hands of a select few, making for a perfect recipe for social disaster and opening the door for the rise of hate-filled nationalism in which the Jew served as a cultural "other".[97] Such an atmosphere breeds a sense of despair, undermines the belief in the progress of humanity, and most often fosters anti-democratic tendencies in the society; tendencies that according to *In postvogn*, Jews are themselves not immune from.

Who Hates Whom?

In a very sophisticated manner, Peretz lets his Jewish listener-writer character in the second segment use the same anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric that the non-Jew Janek Polniewski condemns. Before he even speaks, the writer presumes that his gentile friend has become an

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[95]Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 69.

[96]Bacon, Gershon. "Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 14 March 2011. 6 September 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poland/Poland_from_1795_to_1939).

[97]Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*, 176-182.

anti-Semite who believes Jews today are the warts that should be "cut off from Europe's pretty nose" (*Ale verk*, vol 2, 76; *Reader*, 112). The Jewish character is subsequently caught by surprise upon hearing a strong outspoken condemnation of anti-Semitism by Polniewski:

> *"Anti -Semitism is an illness. Politics puts itself by a sickbed as a stupid and bad doctor, who wants to lengthen the illness.*
> *Politics uses anti-Semitism; a stone flies into the air, so Bismarck's assistant directs it at the window of the synagogue; if not, other windows would shatter. A protesting fist is raised, so they shove an emaciated, stooped, Jewish shoulder under it; if not, other bones would crack...*
> *But the stone, the fist, the hatred, have an existence of their own…*
> *Who generally succumbs to illness? Weak children, old and feeble men and women, sick people. Who succumbs to a moral epidemic? The child of the masses, the effete aristocrat and a few madmen who jump out of the crowd and lead the ailing in a wild dance! Only healthy minds endure!"*
> *"How many healthy minds are there among us?" I ask.*
> *"How many? Very few, unfortunately," answers Polniewski.*
> *We both remained sadly silent. (Ale v*erk, *vol 2, 77;* Reader, *112).*

Peretz de-familiarizes and reverses the stereotypical roles here: it is the gentile in the story who holds fast to his progressive values of equality despite a rising jingoistic wave in the public opinion, while the modern-Jew, as we shall see, is a reactionary racist who rejects these equalitarian values.

Peretz's Jewish character (the Peretzian character) suspects that his Christian childhood friend, now an adult, married pharmacist, is not revealing the entire truth regarding his relationship with a young Jewish female patient of his. Polniewski credits the woman with curing him out of fashionable Jewish hatred. The character of the modern Jewish writer offers the following stunning interior reflection on the matter:

> *Who knows a person? Who knows what he's made of? I'm beginning to think, that I have in front of me a Christian skunk, who sneaks into a Jewish chicken-coop. He wrangles too much over the fortune of Jewish women, too long he's looking for matches; he's ashamed of me! Why doesn't he want to "talk at length"? Why doesn't he want to tell me everything as it occurred, with all the details? Who knows what kind of a role he played in this thing, if not* the old role of the snake in the Garden of Eden!

> *What's the matter, his conscious wouldn't let him? Such a matter! A young Jewish married woman, why not! Once it was considered a duty to baptize [Jews, a.m.], today he feels obliged to at least turn a Jewish woman against her God, her parents, her husband, and – her entire life.*
> This is the meaning of liberalism*, to go into a prison, bringing with you a wave of fresh air, a bundle of sun beams, to wake up the prisoner, give him a piece of candy, and then to disappear…not to see how the prisoner gnashes his teeth when the rusty key turns the lock once again; how anguished his face becomes, how narrow the air becomes to him, how spasmodically he breathes, how he tears his own hair and flesh from his body, or how he moistens, his moldy mice-bitten piece of bran-bread with tears, if only he could still cry…*
> *Waking up a dark, sleepy, repressed Jewish-woman's heart, so a sweet romantic tone would cling there, so a new, wild, unknown, or long forgotten, emotion would arouse; to kiss and then afterwards adieu! Shut the door! So her life would be sour and bitter. (*Ale verk*, vol 2, 82;* Reader*, 115-116).*

What a reader of modern Jewish literature might expect from an anti-Semitic gentile or from a reactionary Rabbi, he gets in these lines from a supposedly modern and enlightened Jewish character. This character equates liberalism with an illusionary candy for a prisoner, not as something granting him any genuine freedom. The non-Jew who confesses to his friend that he developed some strong emotions towards a young Jewish woman is demonized by the Jew as being a predator who preys on young Jewish chickens. The gentile is further equated with the seductive Biblical snake from the Garden of Eden. This interior reflection presents primal, tribal instincts of protecting one's own, serving as a watch dog of the Jewish nation and rejecting the bourgeois myth of romantic love (which Sholem Aleichem felt a Jewish novel should reject), in favor of national loyalty. The great irony that Peretz masterfully produces here is that this anti-liberal interior reflection by the Jewish character comes in sharp contrast to his non-Jewish travel companion's insistence on not abandoning liberal values.

In a way, Peretz confronts his own personal struggles with his past beliefs. In a Hebrew poem he published in 1886 (five years prior to the publication of *In postvogn*) entitled "To A Jewish Maiden Who Alienates Herself", he directs his arrows towards Jewish women for

being “foreign”, and corrupt for going with a "corrupting goy" (a common motif that existed previously in the Yiddish and Hebrew *Haskala* literature,[98] and one that later reappear in his career[99]). To whom is she foreign?

To "us", to the entire Jewish collective. She is accused of not using her Hebrew name, deceitfully using a *goyish* one; of conversing in French and not in her peoples tongue (most likely Peretz is referring to Yiddish); of reading "Love poems, melodies of lust\ They are not for us, sister, not for us!" Out of the poem’s six stanzas, these two deal with a theme that is similar to the theme in the story, namely the biological survival of the Jewish nation:

> *The best your parents have chosen for you*
> *An educated and honest young man,*
> *From his pretty eye a pure soul was reflected,*
> *On his forehead floats a thought.*
> *But alas, Hebrew maiden,*
> *To your fiancé you are foreign.*
>
> {…}
>
> *For a drunken* goy[100]*, a nobody,*
> *As a solid peg he is stuck in your heart*

[98]Take for example Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn's play, written a century prior to Peretz, both his Yiddish version, *Laykhtzin un Fremelay* (Silliness and Sanctimony, ca. 1794), and his Hebrew version, ("*Kalut da‘at u-tsevi‘ut*"). In it, the modern Jewish enlightened character has to 'save' the young Jewish bourgeois daughter from assimilation in the bad and corrupt (meaning non-Jewish) environment, one of brothels and prostitution. The play appeared as an English translation with an introduction in Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Asher Dauber’s *Landmark Yiddish plays: a Critical Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). For the Hebrew version with a very thorough introduction by Dan Miron see: Aaron Wolfssohn and Dan Miron, *Kalut da‘at u-tsevi‘ut: Rav. Ḥanokh ẏe-Rabi Yosefkeh* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Mif′alim ‘Universitayim Le-Hotsa′ah Le-′or, [1977]).

[99]For example Peretz's 1900 Hebrew story *Ha-nidakhat* (The Deposed), where the non-Jewish lover abandons the young Jewish protagonist, and she is left neither here (in the Jewish world) nor there (in the *goyish* one). See also: Ruth Shenfeld, "The Family Crisis: An Integrated View on the Decline of the Jewish Family Unit in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Poland as Reflected in the Works of Frischmann, Peretz, Barashm, and Zapolska," (Hebrew) in *Studies in East European Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Professor Shmuel Werses*, edited by David Assaf et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2002), 346.

[100]A common stereotype of Eastern European Jews in regard to non-Jews, see N68 in this chapter.

For your heart desired golden buttons,
He is your dream in the night when you sleep,
Ha, Jewish maiden,
To us you are foreign![101]

The dichotomy here is very clear. Two figures are presented in this much less subtle late 19th century version of a dating website: the first is a pure, educated man who comes from a similar background as yours, someone your parents approve of. The second is a greedy non-Jew with an uncontrolled drinking problem. The latter is borrowed directly from the very common stereotype amongst Eastern European Jewry, regarding the non-Jews as drunks who beat their wives. These are the clear choices for a young Jewish girl. Matching up with non-Jews means "giving in" to desire, both in financial terms (the promise of upward mobility) and in sexual terms (satisfying the libidinal urge). "The nationalist discourse about women", writes Iris Parush, "thus functioned as both a pretext for and means of appropriating the space of women and gaining mastery over it."[102]

This direct rejection of liberal values would be revisited and questioned throughout the conversation between the two traveling companions in the second segment of *In Postvogn*. An anti-enlightenment sentiment exists amongst Jews, Peretz tells us. Largely, this sentiment is a direct response to persecution. While a cultural look inward has some merit, it is dangerous to draw excessive distinctions between peoples and make exclusion a value, lest it degenerate into racism. As the Peretzian character alarmingly attests immediately after expressing his own chauvinistic thoughts:

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[101]*Peretz,* Kitvey Y.L. Perets, *taf"tsadek.*

[102]Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 246.

> *We ate our fill so much with poison, with malice, with hatred, that when we are given bread with salt, we are also certain that it is poisoned…may our hand shiver out of pity, may a tear of compassion hang in our eye, and on our lips – consolation…*
> *It's hard to believe! We are also infected; the epidemic is upon us too. (*Ale verk, *vol 2, 82;* Reader, *116).*

This distancing from the hint of Jewish racism at the end of *In postvogn* may be a first step in the creation of a progressive and culture-focused version of nationalism, also referred to as 'Diaspora nationalism'. This movement drew extensively from Peretz's new Yiddish cultural project, through which Peretz sought to establish a 'respectable' non-trashy and yet modern Yiddish literature, a literature that was suitable for men, while aiming higher than the base of Yiddish readership at the time – which consisted mainly of women. Both conversations in the mail coach are between male characters who discuss Jewish women. While this text shows that Peretz questions the anti-liberal sentiment that was present in the Jewish street, women in his 'new national project' are not even sitting in the mail coach, and they are still "symbolic means in the policies of men".

From the Province to the City and Back

> *Mir geyen fun hoyz tsu hoyz, fun numer eyns on. Ikh veys aleyn, vu yidn un vu nisht-yidn voynen, ikh kuk nor in fentster arayn. Fargelte fentster iz a simn fun "ato bekhartonu", bifrat nokh oysgehakte shoybn, fartretene mit kishelekh un zek… far dos – blumen-tep un forhangen zenen simonim muvhokim, az do voynt shoyn azoyner, vos hot nisht aza prave afn dales vi yene…(Peretz, Bilder fun a provints rayze)*[103]

The major Yiddish belletristic text that Peretz produced during the early part of the 1890's is called *Bilder fun a provints rayze: In Tomashover povyat um 1890 yor* ("Impressions of a

[103]"We go from house to house, from number one and beyond. I know where Jews and where non-Jews live, I need only look inside the windows. Windows that turned yellow are a sign for "the chosen people", especially shattered glass, trampled with pillows and pillow-cases… while – window boxes full of flowers and drapes are obvious proof that somebody else already lives here, someone who doesn't have such a monopoly on poverty."(Ale verk, vol 2, 125).

Journey Through the Provinces in the Tomaszów Region around 1890", 1891). It drew an atmospheric image of despair and doubt, reflective of Peretz's viewpoint regarding the extreme alienation encountered by the modern Jewish intelligentsia when they tried to connect with members of "their own people". The result of these encounters was a "tragic-comic drama of alienation" in Miron's words[104]. Peretz's work, which was inspired by his participation in a statistical expedition deep into the Jewish Pale of Settlement, signifies a new genre in Yiddish literature of "the reportage".[105]

As an agent of modernity, at certain parts of the text, Peretz exemplified through his protagonist the attitude of the modern man who believes himself to be superior to the provincials. Fredric Jameson accurately described this modernist attitude and condition:

> *The modern still had something to do with the arrogance of city people over the provincials, whether it was a provinciality of peasants, other and colonized cultures, or simply the precapitalist past itself: that deeper satisfaction of being absolument moderne … those 'modern' city dwellers or metropolitans of earlier decades themselves came from the country or at least could still register the coexistence of uneven worlds; they could measure change in ways that become impossible once modernization is even relatively completed (and no longer some isolated, unnatural and unnerving process that stands out to the naked eye). It is an unevenness and a coexistence that can also be registered in a sense of loss...* [106]

Peretz is clearly one of those "arrogant metropolitans of earlier decades", who "could measure change" from a very intimate prospective between "uneven worlds". In this work (as in the essay *Bildung*), Peretz exposes the failure of the modern national intelligentsia, the

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[104]See Dan Miron, "On the Classical Image of the Shtetl in Yiddish Belles Lettres," (Yiddish) in *Der imazh fun shtetl: Dray literarishe shtudyes* (The image of the shtetl: Three literary studies) (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv, 1981), 105.

[105]David Hirsh-Roskies, *"Sifrut Yidish Be-Polin*," (Hebrew) in: Israel Bartal & Israel Gutman editors, *Kiyum Va-Shever*, vol 2 (Israel: Merkaz Zalma Shazar Le-Toldot Israel, 2001), 209-210.

[106]*Fredric Jameson*, The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998 *(Verso: London and New York, 1998), 54.*

Jewish *absolument moderne,* to deliver on its promised mission to lead the Jewish people into modernity, because of its own distance from the masses. In Peretz's case, he also had problems reaching out to the intelligentsia, which he expressed at the time in his personal correspondence.[107] The role Peretz assigns his protagonist is one of a failed mediator who exists between tradition and assimilation, between the shtetl and the big city, and between the assimilated Jan Bloch and the observant Jews who provided the subject matter for his research.[108] Peretz depicts one encounter of his modern protagonist with two young men at the house of a kosher butcher as one of sheer astonishment and foreignness towards him: "…on their young faces appeared a kind of wonderment-fear, as if they have actually fallen down from one world into a second one."[109]

If the purpose of the expedition was to discover Jewish poverty; then a kind of discovery indeed occurs, but the protagonist suggests no real solution to it, and there is no explicit treatment of class antagonism. Arguably, no solution should be expected since the story is a work of fine literature and is not a political manifesto. The protagonist does, however, question the utility of the tool he is using, namely scientific recording of data, as a positive step towards solving the problem of poverty. On the other hand, the message here reinforces

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[107] In a letter to his close friend and colleague, the writer Yankev Dinezon (1856-1919), he writes in Hebrew that "the intelligentsia of Warsaw, that are at the same level as the Kiev intelligentsia hate me very much, but it is a hidden hatred for they fear my sharp tongue; I couldn't bear the love of sinners, I couldn't bear the respect of the flatterers and criminals, and foolish and stupid ones. I sell the bib' one by one and eat up my money... If there were publicity, then I would have sold many. But you are without me a zero, and I without you less than that, I am a minus. When you'll come, from the minus and the zero some number will come out."(Peretz, *Briv un redes* 1929, 80). The "bib'" refers to copies of Peretz's alamac "*Di yudishe bibliyotek*", that featured *Bilder fun a provints rayze*.

[108]Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," *7.*

[109]Yudishe bibliyotek, vol 2, 117. In the Ale verk version:"…on their young faces appeared fear and bewilderment; as if they spotted somebody from a different world." (p. 164). There are a few differences between the Ale verk version and the original version from *Di yudishe bibliyotek* 1891. I translated according to the original version.

the message in *Bildung*, that an alienated urban intelligentsia is not useful in creating mass social change.

Before delving into the text itself, it is vital to briefly examine how Peretz's *Bilder fun a provints rayze* fits into the literary tradition of writing about poverty.

Representing Poverty

Writing about poverty was common in 19th century fiction. Iconic European writers such as Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (and for that matter S.Y. Abramovitsh in Jewish literature) set standards for this theme. Accurately representing poverty was a major goal that was generally dealt with through *realist fiction*, a style that set out to represent social realities as they were rather than through rose colored lenses. The genre was a corrective for works that were strictly occupied with the lives of the aristocracy.

In Yiddish literature, Sholem Aleichem became occupied with the ways Jewish poverty was being represented by Yiddish writers very early in his career. He thoroughly addressed this topic in his article from the period, which was serially published in the Yiddish press during the year 1888, under the title "Jewish Poverty in the Best Works of Our Yiddish Writers".110

Sholem Aleichem opens his article by citing the radical Russian poet and editor of Dostoyevsky, Nikolai A. Nekrasov (1821-1878). Nekrasov was had a great influence on Yiddish and Hebrew poets at the time with his verses about the poor Russian masses,111

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[110]Sholem Aleichem, "Der yidisher dales in di beste verke fun undzere folks-shrift-shteler," supplement to *Yudishes folksblat* (St. Petersburg, 1888): 1075-90, 1101- 10, 1149-57, 1183-89, 1205-16.

[111]A few poets, like the Yiddish poet A. Goldfaden, and the Hebrew poet Y.L. Gordon (a great influence on Peretz, see in chapter 4), who were also cited by Sholem Aleichem, were crowned as "the Yiddish Nekrasov" or

including on the anarchist Yiddish poet Dovid Edelstadt who reworked some of his poetry into Yiddish, transferring its content to the reality of working class Jews in America in the 1880's.112 Sholem Aleichem, through Nekrasov, is setting the standards of what he expects from Yiddish writers: realistically depicting Jewish life, which, according to him, equates with depicting poverty.

Sholem Aleichem then moves on to praise the early works of Abramovitsh (focusing on his novella Fishke The Lame: A Story of Jewish Poor People, 1869[113]), for depicting Jewish poverty in a "realist" way and not through rosy lens as some do (like M. Spektor); and for not "degrading" his works about poverty stricken Jews by infusing them with stories of crime and intrigues, as the writers of popular novels tend to do. Abramovitsh's poor may sometimes act cruelly, but that doesn't mean that they lack in feelings or in heart, for even a warm and good heart could be frozen by living a life of pressing poverty.[114] Miron has shown how Abramovitsh's poor protagonists are more capable of achieving genuine feelings of romantic love, than is the modern enlightened "rationalist" Jew[115].

"the Hebrew Nekrasov". See Jacob Shatzky, "Paltiel zamoshtishens letters to Sholem Aleichem," *Yivo Bleter*11 (1937): 23–24.

[112]For example in his poem *Taybele*, which one of his stanzas goes:"They are taking a walk in Grand Street\ Taybele shines in her dress!\ Though the poor man in "prince Albert"\ Is haggard, pale as death." See Kalmen Marmor, *Dovid Edelstadt* (Yiddish) (New York: Ikuf, 1950), 62-63.

[113]Sholem Aleichem adds a comment that he heard that Abramovitsh is working now on a new version of the story (which Abramovitsh indeed was doing, expanding it to a novel length piece).

[114]Sholem Aleichem, "Der yidisher dales in di beste verke fun undzere folks-shrift-shteler," 1077-1078. Abramovitsh's poor are also devided into 2 categories: the wandering "gypsy beggars", and those who stay in one place.

[115]Dan Miron, "'The Sentimental Education' of Mendele Moykher Sforim" (Hebrew), afterword to Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Sefer ka-kabtsanim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988), 201-268.

Sholem Aleichem's article also criticized writers who make distinctions between the Jewish and non-Jewish poor based on cultural stereotypes such as the "drunken goy", but rather asserts that the only difference between those two groups is that poverty amongst Jews is simply greater than anywhere else[116] (in Czarist Russia that might be true). But through all his discussion over the issue of representations of the poor in Yiddish literature, Sholem Aleichem pays little attention to the question of their potential as agents of progressive social change (the discussion of the repressed emotions of Abramovitsh's poor stands out in this case), a fact that can be attributed to his slight tendency towards political conservatism.

Patrick Greaney, writing on the topic of representations of the poor, argues that discussion of the poor needs to simultaneously grapple with the question of their potential. Regarding 19th century fiction, he makes the following argument:

> *In the nineteenth century, the poor were associated with power. They were destitute, but they also embodied productive and destructive forces. Their labor power and revolutionary potential situated them in the center of any wider consideration of Europe's political and economic reality as well as any reflection upon its future. The link between the poor and power also made them a focal point for the modernist aesthetic concern with the representation of potential and virtuality. If the treatment of the poor in literary and philosophical texts was to be faithful to their "powerful" constitution, they had to be represented not only in their actual state but also in relation to their potential. This challenge aligned the theorization and representation of poverty with the more general modern project of orienting literary language and philosophical thought according to forces and possibilities, a task that is evident in a wide range of figures and concepts, from Nietzsche's overman to Mallarme's absent flower.*[117]

Greaney's remarks create an expectation to see something similar in Peretz's text, for he was certainly influenced by these artistic currents. Does Peretz show the potential of the poor as

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[116]Sholem Aleichem, "Der yidisher dales in di beste verke fun undzere folks-shrift-shteler," 1188-1189.

[117]Patrick Greaney, *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), x.

agents of progressive social change in *Bilder fun a provints rayze*, alongside the image of poverty? Consider for example the following passage taken from the segment in *Bilder* entitled *A Yingele* (A Little Boy):

> *A few small houses are standing stone blind. There goes a piece of dry bread, with or without herring. And maybe – night-time prayers are said without any supper… in one of the small houses stands the widow, who needs so little, and she pounds herself on her meager little chest while giving a long final confession… maybe she is measuring her shrouds… she remembers her past, with a golden stripe seeded wedding-dress, and from her old eyes a tear drops down, and she smiles here in the dark night: what does a Jewish woman need?*
> *My orphan has something else in mind.*
> *Dancing with his little foot, he lifts up his little head to the moon, which swims silly-aristocratically from out of one small flats inside the second one.*
> *He moans. Have you seen a star falling? – No:*
> *Oy – he says – I would have liked, that Messiah would come!*
> *What do you mean?*
> *I want the moon to become bigger! Mercy on it! It has indeed sinned, but to suffer for so long… it's been six thousand years already…*
> *All and all two requests: from father on earth – an additional onion, and from father in the sky – that the moon would become bigger!*
> *An enormous desire gets a hold of me to tell him: relax! Your local father will soon marry; you will soon get a stepmother, become a stepchild, and will cry for a piece of bread! Waive the onion, forget the moon, think about bread! But I barely restrained myself.*[118]

We read the contradiction in this passage between the poor skinny widow who has accepted her fate and is patiently awaiting her death, versus the orphan boy, who asks for more onion (reminiscent of Dickens' famous orphan), for redemption, and for the moon. Indeed, through the character of the orphan, Peretz address the potential of the poor. But does his representation of that potential constitute *revolutionary* potential which would tap the power inherent in the poor?

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[118] *Yudishe bibliyotek* 2, 103-104; Ale verk, vol2, 148-149. The most significant change here between the original version and the Ale verk one, appears in the inner-thoughts of the Peretz character, who, after he wants to tell the boy to forget about the moon, also adds "think about bread!".

In the closing lines of this segment entitled, *A Yingele*, the following exchange between the orphan and the Peretz-character appears:

> *"Why," asks the boy, "Did God create in such a way that each and every one of his creatures would eat something different?"*
> *"Kid, if everybody would have gotten to eat alike, than everybody would have been equal."*[119]

The word *glaykh* means in Yiddish "alike", but can also mean "equal". So in the original Yiddish, the protagonist uses the same word in the for the amount of food and for the status of people. The orphan wonders about the injustice of the world, and receives a somewhat cynical reply from the Peretz-character. The latter is willing to offer the poor merely the potential of climbing the social ladder, not the right to abolish it, a goal which would be achieved if only the poor provincial Jews had the proper guidance from the educated urban Jews like himself. Like Dickens and Abramovitsh, in *Bilder* Peretz was thinking of fixing certain broken aspects of society (such as education), and he was genuinely bothered by his close encounter with poverty (signs of proto-socialism), but was not considering any broader systematic alteration of its fundamental structure.

The protagonist's views towards the orphan's ambitions were revealed in the interior-monologue ("relax! Your local father will soon marry; you will soon get a stepmother, become a stepchild, and will cry for a piece of bread! Waive the onion, forget the moon, think about bread!"). He sees those ambitions as unrealistic fantasies, which only divert the individual from finding practical ways of getting bread (that is, real food and a living) for himself. His anger equates to a rejection of the hope that the poor will imagine revolutionary change. Here, his critique is in staunch contrast to the satirical arrows Peretz directed just a

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[119] *Yudishe bibliyotek* 2, 104; Ale verk, vol 2, 149. In the Ale verk version it reads:"He doesn't know that if everybody would have had eaten alike, then everybody would have been equal."

few years later against his passive character Bontche The Silent, who was incapable of asking for anything but a piece of bread.[120]

Imperialism and Peretz's Journey to the Provinces

Fredrick Jameson, in his essay "Modernism and Imperialism", claims that "the structure of imperialism produced its specific literature" and "also makes its mark on the inner forms and structures of that new mutation in literary and artistic language to which the term "modernism" is loosely applied."[121] Jameson sees the inability of the writer living in imperialist countries to grasp the system at its whole and how it functions because the darkest and most abusive parts of that system take place in the distant colonies, not inside the boundaries of the imperial nation state. This inability to understand the imperial system limits artistic content and is at the heart of what modernism seeks to solve: "It is only that new kind of art which reflexively perceives this problem and lives this formal dilemma that can be called modernism in the first place".[122] Modernism embodies within it a new sense of space. Jameson terms "characterizations of the modern as some inward turn"[123] as misleading and he rejects them. Instead, he seeks an exceptional situation in which the third-world and first-

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[120]For a complete analysis of the story *Bontche The Silent*, see second chapter.

[121]Fredrick Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 152. It should be noted that much of Jameson's line of argument is based on previous monumental work done by the Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács, especially in his *Studies in European Realism* (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950).

[122]Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, 158.

[123]Compare with Miron's analysis of the *shtetl* stories in which the modern Jewish writer visits the shtetl, which he termed "dramas of the mind". (Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 28-9). Though it should be noted that Jameson does write elsewhere that: "The great modernists were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your footprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style" (Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 5-6).

world literatures co-exist, allowing for literatures "of the metropolis and of the colony simultaneously." He seeks:

> *A national situation which reproduces the appearance of First World social reality and social relationships – perhaps through a coincidence of its language with the imperial language – but whose underlying structure is in fact much closer to that of the third world or of colonized daily life. A modernism arising in these circumstances could then be inspected and interrogated for its formal and structural differences from the works produced within the metropolis…"*[124]

Jameson's line of argument leads him to see Ireland as a place where such a literature is possible (their common language with imperialist England), and Joyce's *Ulysses* as an example. Trying to apply Jameson's paradigm to Peretz's *Bilder fun a provints rayze*, which should help us in positioning within the framework of a literature of imperialism, we find some points in common.

First, consider the mixture of metropolis and colony. Peretz, the modern city Jew, travels from Warsaw through the Tomaszów Region of Poland. Being within the Polish rule, this region had slightly better economic and social conditions than the Russian-controlled Pale of Settlement to the East.[125]

Peretz was sent from Warsaw, the big metropolis, under the sponsorship of the financial giant Jan Bloch to "study the natives", i.e., the Jews of the Pale. Bloch, who had close ties to the

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[124]Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, 164.

[125] Interestingly, in relation with Jameson, the English word *pale* was borrowed from the term applied to the area of English settlement in Northern Ireland, where the lands of the "wild Irish" were considered "beyond the pale".

imperialist Czar, was active in Jewish Diplomacy, and later developed a relationship with Theodore Herzl.[126] Why was Jan Bloch interested in sponsoring a study about poor Jews?

On the surface, as was discussed in the Introduction, Bloch hoped to refute various anti-Semitic accusations against Jews, to promote liberal policies towards Jews, and to oppose discriminatory legislation. Allegedly Bloch was interested in poor Jews because he shared a common origin with them. But from studies about the ways the mechanism of imperialism function, we know that under the auspices of helping minorities or defending moral and religious principles, lies a long-standing means of manipulating public opinion. Magnates frequently expanded their control over underdeveloped regions. The Jewish magnates, like Bloch, operated in the same way, as argued by Daniel Gutwein.[127]

The suffering of Jews in peripheral countries could be wielded as a political tool in Jewish diplomacy. Under the patronage of the Jewish plutocracy, public and organizational activity was developed and directed towards the Jewish middle classes.[128] In this climate, an aspiring Jewish cultural leader such as Peretz, a middle class Jew who was fluent in the national language (Polish) as well as Yiddish, was valued for his abilities to communicate with both the "natives" and the authorities.

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[126]The term “Jewish Diplomacy” means western Jews using their financial and social power for the sake of their poor fellow Jews from Eastern Europe or other parts. This phenomenon goes back to the Damascus affair in 1840 and the involvement of the Rothschild family and others. For more on Jan Bloch see also in the Intro the part about Jan Bloch entitled "Jan Bloch, Peretz and The Structure of Jewish Economy".

[127]Gutwein, *"Ha-diplomatia Ha-yehudit ba'me'a ha-tsha esre: reshit ha-leumiyut ha-yehudit*?," 159-176. Such auspices could be "bringing Christian morals to Africans", or “liberating” Afghan women.

[128]As a result, the Jewish middle classes learned the foundations of political organization and action, while a gradual politicization of their Jewish identity occurs (Gutwein, "*Ha-diplomatia Ha-yehudit ba'me'a ha-tsha esre*").

Peretz, fresh out the rural area after the survey, plays the role of the foreigner in *Bilder fun a provints rayze*. Trying to appeal to the Jewish intelligentsia, he tells them essentially: "you have come up so far from these people; but now you have to get to *know them*" in order to lead them." He writes in the short intro to *Bilder fun a provints rayze*:

> *People were turbulent already. Libels over libels were pouring from all directions.*
> *It was decided amongst ourselves, that one must acquaint himself with the regular everyday Jewish life; to see what is really going on in the small towns; to understand what people hope for, from what people live, what people do…* [129]

This paragraph uses a reportage style to manipulate its targeted readership,[130] by putting them – meaning the Jewish intelligentsia (by default, only they need to get "acquainted" with the "regular" life of small time Jews) – in the same boat of victimhood as the shtetl-Jews. This stylistic form helps to blur the political and economic interests of his patron.

A look at a later part of the "personal journal" he wrote during the statistical expedition, entitled *Asekurirt*, ("Insured"; segment 15), helps us better understand the ways in which the "Peretzian character" gives us a glimpse into what he represents. Describing his thoughts in anticipation of visiting another town, he portrays himself as now being better acquainted with shtetl-life and simultaneously feeling more doubtful about his mission. He claims that he now knows what to expect, as he anticipates accumulating data:

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[129]*Yudishe bibliyotek*, 54; Ale Verk, vol2, 119. In the later Ale verk version a last line is added at the end which strengthen the nationalist sentiment of the intro:"what the people say!" The word "people" here comes in the sense of 'nation' or 'folk' (see also: Niger, *Y.L. Peretz*, 200). This means that Peretz, adding this phrase at a time of a more established Jewish nationalism, saw *Bilder* in retrospect as a nationalist composition, or in other words, those were the aspects he wanted to be emphasized to his later readers.

[130]This acting out by the narrator of a reporter should not be taken at face value but rather as just one of the methods, according to Miron, that Peretz used in order to lay out his vision of the *shtetl*-existence (Dan Miron, *Der imazh fun shtetl: dray literarishe shtudyes* (Tel Aviv: 1981), 104).

Early in the morning I will begin to write down – I know beforehand, what if will be: if not 36 rubles a year, 33 and 32 will be the earnings… I will find many professions and few blessings; factories of potash, many empty houses; the synagogue's sexton would do the math for me: he is a messenger, she – a vendor; two girls are servants, in Lublin, in Zamość… one boy is a teacher's assistant, the other is a servant, and the sister-in-law with three, four, or five kids went home to her papa-and-mama…
I will meet abandoned children, who bathe themselves together with geese and ducks on the edge of the swamp; teeny-tiny small fry, who tear their little necks – in baby-cribs, sick without help in their beds, young husbands living with their in-laws and studying traditional books, young wives with raw silk wigs with shame or without shame…I barely close my eyes, swimming through the most weary, green, pale, twisted shapes in front of me…rarely one smiles. Rarely one with a dimple…all the men are so unmanly, so clumsy…young wives with torpid eyes, carrying – a trough of fruit, a sack with onions, or a fresh "you chose us" prayer together with a sack of onions. – I know in advance, that I will encounter an improper tavern, two or three horse-thieves, and more than two or three incidents…
But what about statistics? Can one answer the question: how many empty bellies, empty teeth; or from how many people does [the appearance of] a thin piece of bread pull the eyes out of their sockets as if with tongs; or how many people actually died out of hunger – turns out an impropriate tavern, a thief and a horse-thief?
Whereas medicine wisely invented a machine which can measure your pulse and your heartbeat, statistics plays stupidly with numbers. *(My highlight, A.M.)*
Does statistics know how many times or how – every time – how deep and how strong the heart pounded by a grandson of noble Spanish decent, the son of a great Rabbi, or a landlord, before he committed a wrong for the first time? And how long afterwards did it bleed?? Do statistics at least count the sleepless nights before and after? Does it calculate how many days of hunger, how many times the kids quivered with cramps, how many times you became physically ill with the first pouring of a glass of tainted bootleg liquor?
In the empty air swimming for our yellow, pale and blue faces, and brown-blue burned lips – utter:
24 days there was no fire in my chimney.
10 straight days we ate shells of potatoes.
10 died without a doctor, without a prescription; the fourth I had to save at once.
The hoarse words are ripping my heart, as a blunt knife; I escape from the window by which I stood; but the house is full of ghosts.
By the oven stands a red Jew, a glutton:
Ha, ha! – He laughs, – stealing, dealing in stolen goods? It's also a business! Minimum a month in prison! – And in a month I would have lost a treasure…for me all the noblemen would testify…honestly! Honestly!
The voice is even worse; it saws… I throw myself on the bed, I shut my eyes, and the good old rabbi's wife from Shul appears in front of me. But, – she says with her childish silver voice, – but, if after all is said and done, if it would turn out to be all right for you, – would you, my child, cite the saying: ve-

amkho kulam tsadikim*? And are all your people righteous?... (Yudishe bibliyotek, 123-124; Ale Verk, vol2, 171-2).*

In this inner-discussion about poverty, social injustice, and the brutal new economic playing field, Pertez redefines what is lawful and what is criminal, and ties it all at the end to the national question; thereby politicizing it. The shtetl-Jews are as ghosts to him, haunting his consciousness with images of human suffering and of want. No accumulation of more and more "cold data" or "statistics" would suffice in acutely expressing both the total human experience of living in poverty, and of the inner-emotional world of the outsider encountering such suffering.The protagonist here is the writer coming from the imperialist-core to an underdeveloped "dark" and distant corner in the periphery, struggling to grasp the system at its whole and the way it functions. He is struggling to produce artistic content under such circumstances. As Jameson points out, this desperate struggle to understand the imperial system is at the heart of what modernism seeks to solve.

But despite this obvious struggle and Bloch's underlying intentions, Peretz is not writing in an imperial-language. Instead, Peretz is writing in a "third world" language precisely the exceptional situation that Jameson seeks. It is the co-existence of third-world and first-world literatures, the simultaneous literatures "of the metropolis and of the colony." Through his modern protagonist in *Bilder*, Peretz reproduces the appearance of First World social reality and social relationships. But he shares a linguistic medium with the "natives" he visits in real life, producing a literature whose underlying structure is much closer to that of the colonized daily life. Its composition differentiates from the works produced strictly within the metropolis by its segmented travelogue structure. By its Yiddish and journalistic nature, it simultaneously reports on the "natives", and produces a literary work that is accessible for the very same community of people which it documents.

In this transitional work between positivism and proto-socialism, Peretz is not suggesting any comprehensive solution to the poor Jews' problems and he does not structurally and systematically address the problem of unequal economic development of his time.[131] Though one might argue that that is it unfair to ask this of him in the first place, and it is the task of the reader to look for the solutions, still, by not suggesting any radical alternative, he is in practice suggesting working within the system; promoting an integration of Jews in the current world-order. However, by producing fine literature rather than any essay in sociology, he is capable of stirring one's emotion towards reality as a first process towards grasping its structural mechanisms and eventually confronting them. It is through literature that he can create empathy amongst its readers towards their fellow man and stir anger towards the social reality that is responsible for people's misery.

The protagonist's distain for statistics does not extend to negation of the practice of science. He recalls his positive attitude towards the medical science which "wisely invented a machine, which can read your pulse and your heartbeat". His fragmented narrative structure does not negate modernization or modernity, as is very fashionable in our post-modern world.[132] It is rather a critique of the failure to embrace modernity properly and completely. Marc Caplan for example, sees *Bilder fun a provints rayze* as:

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[131]One explanation of unequal development in modern times can be borrowed from Danny Gutwein, who writes: "As much as the integration of the world market deepened the division of labor and strengthened the dependency between the industrial and the developed economies during the 19th century, in this the importance of the peripheral countries became greater in the general economic and strategic considerations of western countries." (Gutwein, "*Ha-diplomatia Ha-yehudit ba'me'a ha-tsha esre*," 170). It should be added though that "unequal development" is a universal law relevant to all economic systems, as Samir Amin puts it, "universal history is always the history of unequal development." (Samir Amin, *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis* {Paris: Monthly Review Press, 1980}, 2).

[132]Take also for example these lines by Caplan, which try to make the early Peretz (at least in Yiddish) into a post-modern icon and which see his work as a pocket of resistance to nationalist ideology: "Readers of Yiddish literature can return to the early Peretz precisely because this is the period in his development before the imposition of a nationalizing, though never conventionally nationalist, ideology…"(Caplan, "The Fragmentation

> *...Peretz's effort to salvage for belletristic purposes a work he was unable to publish to affect political change, and this substitution of cultural for political work is characteristic of Yiddish culture, as it is for most disempowered, deterritorialized groups. Given this act of substitution, it is all the more noteworthy that Peretz in the* Rayze-bilder *explicitly rejects the optimistic, progressive assumptions underlying the actual journey it ostensibly records.*[133]

Caplan is portraying Peretz as a stigmatic Schopenhauerian pessimist, not taking into account that even if Peretz was influenced by Schopenhauer (through Polish mediation) there are various ways one can incorporate his ideas. I believe that pessimism in *Bilder* does not negate the hope for a better social order, but rather – in line with Horkenheimer's reading of Schopenhauer – that the suffering can potentially serve as a basis for revolutionary drive.[134] What progressive assumptions does Caplan see Peretz rejecting in *Bilder*? Educating the masses towards "productiveness"? Nationalizing those who belong to the Jewish faith? These are all progressive assumptions at the core of the work.

Furthermore, does Peretz truly reject the "cultural" in favor of the "political"?One must first ask why is it assumed that a cultural work is unable to affect political change or at least why it should be any less effective than a direct political pamphlet? Actually, one can argue that Peretz understood that by converting his text to the symbolic level, he sacrificed no social meaning. Narration, a socially symbolic art (as Jameson declares in a title[135]), could

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of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," 85). This of course is antithetical to Peretz's being, transitioning along the years from diasoporic bourgeois-nationalism (subordinating the interests of the nation as a whole to bourgeois class interests), to diasporic working-class nationalism (aligning himself with the nascent Bund movement).

[133]Ibid, 67.

[134]See David Berry, "Max Horkenheimer: Issues Concerning Liberalism and Culture," in *Revisiting the Frankfurt School: Essays on Culture, Media and Theory*, edited by David Berry (London: Ashgate, 2012), 76-77.

[135]Fredrick Jameson. *The Political Unconsciousness: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art* (London: Routledge, 1983).

potentially influence his urban readers more than another format. After all, a typical post-revolutionary bourgeois instinct is often to step away from any overtly political text.[136]

I argue that the *Bilder* text shows a protagonist whose liberal assumptions are shaken through the narrative. This is also one of the major developments of the Peretz himself, namely his transition during the course of the journey towards proto-socialism, which he chooses to communicate through aesthetic means. The artistic techniques that Peretz used – including interior monologue showing the writer's anticipation of the shtetl that he would see the next day, and reportage like style of narration – merit further discussion.

Artistic Techniques

The reportage narration style of *Bilder fun a provints raze* gives narrative structure which at first glance seems broken and chopped up.[137] The text is divided into many short segments, and often each segment corresponds to an encounter with a different character in the shtetl. This division into "personal segments" reflects Peretz's more atomized consciousness, but in fact each individual's story is just one example of the overwhelming social crisis that he encounters.

[136]One might give here as an example Uncle Tom's Cabin, a work of literature probably more effective than any anti-slavery political pamphlet. In a way, both examples (the direct political pamphlet or "the cultural work" – to use Caplan's essentially intangible division between the cultural and the political) remain in the textual realm. The option of organizing people outside the textual realm is not at all mentioned by Caplan.

[137]Caplan argues that Peretz never quite provides either psychological insight or objective reportage, as one might expect of first- or third-person narrators in realist fiction. He writes that Peretz follows in the wake of Abramovitsh's *Di klyatshe* (which Peretz read in Polish translation) insofar as the narrative voice shifts perspective between third-person description and first-person introspection (Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," 76-77).

The Insanity Motif

The title of Segment 19 in *Bilder*: *Der meshuge* (The Crazy Person) suggests that this one crazy person is alone in this condition. He sneaks into the protagonist's chambers, wanting to know:

> *"Don't you want to write me down?" he asked softly. I didn't know what to answer. He assumes that silence equals confession, and already stands in the middle of the house. Scared and even more bewildered, I don't take my eyes off of him.*
> *"Write it down!" he said impatiently. "Should I hand you ink and a pen?" Not waiting for an answer he pushes me towards the sofa, to the small desk with the writing material. "Write, please, write!"(Ale verk, vol 2, 180)*

"Write about me, document my story", demands the poor beggar who struggles for recognition, "Give voice to my story and don't treat me like others do, as if I am transparent." Peretz essentially tells his readers here, *this guy literally demands that I let his voice be heard. I am changing during this trip because of these encounters and so should you. And what you thought was just a private story is not*. The physical act of writing, of documenting under imposition, is what Peretz was hired in real life to do for Jan Bloch. In this case, in his literary work, he reverses this situation of class-subordination, making his Peretzian character become the agent of the underprivileged, working for them so to speak, rather than for the capitalist. This class-reversal is parallel to the mental-reversal – the upside-down perception of the world by the insane character, who expresses in mental terms what is taking place socially.

The insane person tells Peretz the story of being stoned by other people in the shtetl, and how one stone that hits his head cost him his sanity: "Two or three times a day I have the soul in

my stomach,[138] then I speak out of my stomach… I crow like a rooster… I can't help myself at all, in any way." (Y"B, 133; Ale verk, vol 2, 181).

In the decaying shtetl-reality, stoning is part of human interaction. Every new person the narrator interacts with is like a stone to his head. It makes him forget pre-conceived notions of the world and it hits him, altering his perception, maybe by broadening it, and maybe bruising it senseless. Perhaps Peretz is telling us that becoming physically and mentally bruised is the only way that true feelings of sympathy and compassion towards the "others" come about.

The lowest Jewish classes, Peretz tell his readers, need leadership to move up and out of the under-developed economy in which they live. Their status is only getting worse, the character "crazy Jonah" the beggar tells him: "Today – bad times; I have to beg. I beg for dinner, when the kids are still in *kheyder* (religious school)." By talking to people who are neglected by society, Peretz tries to advance social sensitivity and moreover, national solidarity. But a complete and coherent world-view is still not apparent. In the last account, it remains unclear what this story is suggesting.

Like "crazy Jonah", the writer-character himself goes through a kind of transformation. Starting off with a liberal-mindset, with his nationalism defined at an abstract-level, his own gradual path towards insanity manifested by the shtetl-ghosts he senses, represents his identification with the suffering characters he met face to face in his journey. The *Dibbukim* that haunt him and which arguably represent the relationship between the shtetl Jews and the

[138]Ale Verk - vol2, 181. "Soul in the stomach" is a description of a Dybbuk, different than the kind of insanity that afflicts 'crazy Jonah' (a character of an insane person in *Bilder*) .

protagonist should haunt his urban readers since they are all part of the same collective, the Jewish people, regardless of their class.

The Fire Motif

The motifs of insanity and fire that often occur in shtetl-literature are creation of writers who left the small town in favor of the cities. We can see these themes as projected images of social destruction and decay. The small towns in *Bilder*, writes Miron, "are waiting for the first spark to burst into flames and for the first breeze to carry away their ashes".[139] It is a fire that wakes up the Peretz-character from his vision of visiting shtetl ghosts who visit him. By the end of the segment *Asekurirt*, a fire in a house next door wakes up the narrator. The next segment, *der nisref*, "The Burned" is the story of a person whose home was burned to the ground. For the narrator, this is an opportunity to restart and restructure the Jewish social-economic structure. The literary technique he uses to achieve that goal is the "twisted mirror", or "grotesque-analogy", which Miron uses to point out the impotence of the real world, as portrayed in *Asekurirt*, compared to the legendary and the mythical.[140] As the *Bilder*-narrative progresses, the narrator increasingly turns to the mythical style of storytelling, as way of coping with the harsh social reality he encounters.

The life-story of the fire victim, who lost his property as a result of the tragic accident, is framed as a story of "shtetl upward mobility". Through this framework, Peretz shows how pathetic the possibilities of professional advancement are in the backward shtetl-economy.

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[139]Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 16.

[140]Miron, *Der imazh fun shtetl*, 107.

His agenda is to offer real urban upward mobility as a true possibility, non-illusionary, with worthy social values to embrace.

Peretz ironically describes the shtetl social-ladder in mythical terms, as he writes:

> *...a Jewish livelihood can be such a ladder as Jacob our father saw in his dream, at the time when all the stones became as one in his mind, a ladder that stands on the ground and reaches to the sky. How deeply is it buried in the ground? Only the worm that lies under its feet knows. How high does it stand? Only the stars that light it from above can know.*
> *We look up, we are dizzy. Looking down, deeper and deeper, our guts turn and our faces become forever green.*
> *On this ladder angels go up and down… humans desperately climb up with their last bit of strength and fall down. A Jew, when he doesn't quite break his neck, when he makes the blessing after escaping a great danger, no longer has the strength to climb again…(Y"B, 127; Ale verk, vol 2, 175-176)*

This social ladder is better suited for mythical beings than for humans. It is good for Biblical tales, rooted in the mythology of the Jews becoming a people, and angels find it quite comfortable. But real people, living Jews, are incapable of climbing it. They remain closer to the worms under its feet with no possibility of going anywhere. The Jewish society in the shtetl is a dead-end society. Under such circumstances *Der nisref* (literally "the burned", but meaning in Yiddish one who has lost his property in a fire) lived his life. He "crawled" on such a ladder, as his personal story tells us:

> *Before he "ran" into the village, the ground burned under his bare feet. Cain doesn't really hear his brother's blood, only the cry of a woman and child crying: Food!*
> *But God helped. For a few years in a row he bought fantastic bargains; after a few years –he advanced from a "runner" to a "walker". At home there was ample food supply for a whole week, the mind became calmer, and he had time to feel that his feet have become swollen, that a father of six kids has to walk, not run, if he wants his feet to carry him at-least until their bar-mitzvah…*
> *And God (with Ha-Shem's help) helped further; he is already a village-merchant! Which means he walks from one village to the next only when no opportunity comes up for him to earn meager pay. But when an opportunity comes up for him - he goes by vehicle.*
> *God, blessed be He, helped still more; after a couple of years he already has his own horse and cart!*

And time doesn't stand still, he doesn't rest, God, blessed be He, helps, - a horse becomes a couple of horses, the wheeled cart – a barouche. After that comes his own barouche-driver! He is already a crop-merchant; first he trades with farmers, afterwards – with landowners!

And when God helps, people start to like you: first the lowest rank maintenance guy, afterwards the steward, afterwards the superintendent, afterwards the lackey of the courtyard, and at the very end the count himself. Oh! Then he becomes a "settled" person in the shtetl*. From being a barouche-driver he becomes a house servant, sells his horse and wagon, and in his pocket lays the Earl's receipts…*

What is he now?

In the shtetl *he seems like the sun, around which the stars circulate, the smaller are merchants, and the larger comets are brokers. He shines and lights the whole shtetl with credit. To an anti-Semite*[141] *he seems like a spider sitting in the middle of his net, while the count is one of the flies who become entangled. - After a while our "sun-spider" or "spider-sun" enlarged his small house, signed the terms to marry off his kids, promised a dowry, bought his wife a necklace, and for himself - a sheepskin coat. For his young boys he hired better Hebrew teachers, for his young girls – a teacher, so they should learn at least how to write a letter in Yiddish…*

All of a sudden (in any event – for the shtetl*) the count went bankrupt and our "sun-spider" or "spider-sun" suddenly lost everything.*

……

A month earlier, if I had traveled through, I would have noted:

A house – 1,500 ruble, a propination[142]*, a trade of wood and crops, a loan shark.*

He has the earl for 15,000 rubles with 10 percent, not on mortgage, but on IOUs…

Today I note one word:

*"*nisref*, burned"!*

I can add though:

A man of 82 years, swollen feet, a family of 17 persons… (Y"B, 128-129; Ale verk, vol 2, 176-177)

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[141]The text specifically mentions the name of Jan Jeleński (1845–1909), editor of the anti-Semitic magazine Rola (The Fields), who wrote against the "unproductiveness" of the Jews. This journal appealed to a Polish-Christian petty bourgeoisie engaging in economic competition with Jewish merchants (Stanislaus A. Blejwas, "New political directions: A transition toward popular participation in politics, 1863-90," in *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* edited by M. B. B. Biskupski, James S. Pula, Piotr J. Wróbel (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), 41).

[142]A tavern leased from the Polish Nobility that was given mainly to Jews.

This highly ironic description of the social-economic structure of the shtetl and its "growth potential" is meant to appeal to Peretz's readership; many of whom are young adults in the process of leaving behind this shtetl world. For in comparison to every pathetic and useless aspect of the shtetl society around them, the modern metropolis is "so much better"! In the city, one can move up, the economy is growing; real jobs are available in modern professions. There is something to look forward to because the city runs according to the rules of modern capitalist trade – it is everything that the shtetl is not. This text is equally patronizing and very ironic and humorous. It was this biting ironic style that later Peretz readers did not always grasp, mistaking him for mostly a writer of simple folk tales and Hasidic stories. This strong sense of irony also dominates later additions made to *Bilder*, such as *Di toyte shtot* (The Dead City). In that late segment, the level of the grotesque rises above anything in the original *Bilder*, as ghosts of shtetl Jews outnumber the so-called real shtetl Jews in this town. It is easier for dead Jews to survive than for living Jews, for the dead need no physical nourishment.[143]

Again the narrator tells his readers how the trip changed him. His writing changes too as he adopts the idiom of the shtetl people (for example using the term *nisref* and not a more Germanized Yiddish word), in the process becoming a writer who leads the people to modernity.

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[143]Peretz, *Ale Verk*, vol 3, 75-86; it is dated there 1895-1900. If this date is correct, then it is the Hebrew version of the story "Ir ha-metim" that was published earlier (in *Ha-tzfira*, [Hazefirah], Warsaw, no. 164-165, August 1892). The Hebrew version contains some variations compared to the Yiddish one, and it even includes a reference to the *Rayze bilde*r in Yiddish for those who wish to understand the context of his first sentence:"*Beshikvar hayamin, belekhti lemasa'i lekabets misparim*" ("Once upon a time, when I was going for my trip to gather numbers"). It also contained a passage at the end that was omitted in the Yiddish version in which the storyteller rants against the inhabitants of the dead town. He tells how if somebody from the outside arrives and wants to address the larger questions of the day ("hunger and famine, Argentina and Palestine, "wise" assimilationists, and "pious" nationalists…"), before he would even open his mouth, the stench and the decay would kill him, "and he would rise and walk in the world of the dead {literarily "the world of fantasy", *olam hadimyon*, a.m.}…". In Yiddish Peretz wished to tone down this kind of elitist criticism against lower class Jews; and it also didn't fit to exit out of the character of the old Jew.

Peretz is concerned only with Jewish suffering (in keeping with the mission of the expedition), and ignores the non-Jewish presence in the shtetl. This myopia was typical in Yiddish literature of the time. The distinctive economic function of the Jews as small merchants and middle men between the landowner and the farmer, as a "people-class" of mostly merchants,[144] supported a separate Jewish language (i.e. Yiddish). As the language of a separate Jewish life, Yiddish formed the basis of a Jewish consciousness separate from its environment. This distinction of the Yiddish language would form a strand in Jewish politics that would become a primary force for social justice. Peretz is one of the early forbearers of this cultural-political strand.

Appendix

Hints of Peretz's soon-to-be proclaimed pro-labor direction informed by the *Rayze-bilder* experience and his face-to-face encounter with poverty amongst Jews is also found in a letter Peretz wrote to Dinezon in 1892. He wrote this letter when he was compiling his popular science booklet about the cholera epidemic, and when he himself was not prospering financially. In the cholera booklet, Peretz hints that the epidemic has a social-class element by asking why the poor suffer more than others.[145] In the letter he links the oppression of non Eastern Orthodox Christians within the Czarist Empire, and the modern oppression of the poor under the rule of the bourgeoisie. He writes:

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[144]Jacob Lestschinsky, The Development of the Jewish People in the Last One Hundred Years, 1. Quoted by: Abram Leon The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation (Pathfinder Pr, 1971). See also Introduction.

[145]I.L. Peretz, "Ver es vil – shtarbt nisht af kholi-ra," (Yiddish) (Warsaw: Varshaver hilf-komitet, 1892). In this booklet Peretz also expressed an early interest in Jewish folklore, when he added Jewish popular beliefs concerning the plague (Shatzky, "Perets-shtudyes," 56); see more in chapter Four.

Until today we said that God belongs to the Eastern Orthodox Church and that he protects only those who belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church as he protects the eye in his head. Now we sense that he is also a full-on member of the bourgeoisie, that he is the God of the rich. In Lublin there was a terrible epidemic, and even now, although it is weaker, it takes many victims each day. But only poor people die, and the chunky rich people are living and are healthy and strong. Until now the rich use to die out of fear, but now it is clear, that the epidemic is an epidemic for poor people, and the rich are happy and…give charity…

I was chosen to be the committee's writer to assist the poor at the time of the plague… from it I will have an addition to my salary; salt to add to the peanuts.[146]

[146]Peretz, *Briv un redes* (1929), 59; Also quoted in Khmelnitski , "Y.L. Perets' popular-meditsinishe broshur: Az me vil nisht, shtarbt nisht fun kholi-ra," 152.

Chapter 2: A Radical Shift: Becoming a Social Protest Writer

I write for myself, for my own pleasure; and if sometimes I remember the reader, then he is someone from the highest level of society, a man who has read and studied in a living language.
Peretz in a letter to Sholem Aleichem, 1888.

You haven't suffered the agony of the workers and yet you wish to describe them…I don't ask for firsthand experience, you need not be a worker yourself, if only "you would not turn away from your own flesh", you will feel like the worker and you will live his sorrow. But that time has not yet come for you…
Peretz in a letter to the young writer Yitskhok-Yankev Propus, 1899

Introduction

When Peretz became acquainted with Jewish socialists during the early-mid 1890's, he was inspired to create literature that was primarily devoted to exploring social relations and exposing the suffering in society. He committed many of his artistic productions during the rest of the 1890's to political aims. He sought to give a voice to the voiceless and he encouraged others to speak up and challenge the existing social order. He was never one to flatter, or to give readymade solutions to his readers.

Peretz's sense of excitement about the new organizational ideas brewing amongst urban Jewish workers is reflected in his writings of the period. These are the Jews who had been recently uprooted from rural towns like those Peretz visited during his statistical expeditions. The rise in popularity of Marxism, the strike wave in the Jewish trades in the early 1890s in the northwest region of the Pale,

and the use of Yiddish would all help to create a mass movement of Jewish workers,[147] and to attract and radicalize parts of the Jewish intelligentsia.

While some of Peretz's texts might correctly be perceived as being aimed at helping people recognize that political agitation was in their self-interest, Peretz was aware of the danger of losing his artistic credibility due to excessive partisanship. And in fact, he was also influential in his uncompromising artistic approach. The Yiddish writer and Bundist pioneer B. Gorin (1868-1925, also known as Yitskhok Goyda) credited Peretz for influencing his writing, acknowledging that under Peretz's influence "the pamphleteer element had totally disappeared from my belletristic work".[148]

Peret'z transformation from a liberal[149]-positivist to leaning towards socialism, – caused, to some degree, by the *Bilder* experience, I argue – inspired him to produce the valuable and important Yiddish literature of social protest, which is the focus of this chapter. The chapter also examines Peretz's radicalism as an editor, especially in his *Yontef Bletlekh*, which included his own writing and works by others.

Bontshe Shvayg: the Workers Will Not Be Silent

The short story *Bontshe Shvayg* (Bontshe the Silent) was first published in an American newspaper *Arbeter Tsaytung* (Workers' Paper) in 1894, and only later in Europe.[150] It deals with the perpetually

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[147]Blatman, Daniel. 2010. Bund. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund (accessed April 1, 2013).

[148]B. Gorin, *Gezamelte Shriftn I* (Yiddish) (New York: Elizabeth Gorin, 1927), 37.

[149]"Liberal" here not in the American meaning of "progressive", but in the European sense of "capitalist".

[150]This was not an uncommon phenomenon as Yiddish daily press was forbidden under the czar until the early 20th century, so the Yiddish press (in particular the Yiddish socialist press) pioneered in the U.S. (with publications such as the journal *Tsukunft* and the newspaper *Forverts* beginning from 1892 and 1897 respectively).This story was published only later that year (1894), in one of Peretz's almanacs of that period: *Literatur un lebn*. A slightly revised version of the story, probably by Peretz himself, came out in his collected works in 1901. For an elaborate comparison between the two versions see: Bruce E, Zuckerman, *Job the Silent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 233-236, N 201. The quotes here are taken from the CYCO edition, which is based on the 1901 version.

downtrodden yet silent and passive character of Bontshe, who dies and goes to heaven, where he is received with great honor. The dramatic action unfolds in the heavenly courts, where Bontshe's sorrowful life is judged favorably by the angels and he is ultimately granted his every wish. After being reassured that yes, he really can have whatever he wants, he famously responds:

"*Nu, oyb azoy – shmeykhelt Bontshe – vil ikh take ale tog, inderfri a heyse bulke mit frisher puter!*"[151] ("Well, in that case – smiles Bontshe – I actually want every day, in the morning, a hot roll with fresh butter!")

Many of Peretz's critics agree that from the early-mid 1890's until the end of the decade, Peretz gave higher priority to the ideal of class conflict than to that of national unity; and for this reason it was termed as "Peretz's radical period".[152] This passage from *Bontshe Shvayg*, which deals primarily with Bontshe vis-a-vis Jews who were well off, helps to illustrate Peretz's supposed shift towards class-oriented politics:

> *"Once," continues the Defending Angel after a drink of water, "a change occurred in his life…a carriage on rubber wheels flew by with horses dashing off…the carriage-driver had already been lying for a long time with a split head on the cobblestone pavement…foam spurted from the mouths of the scared horses, from under the horseshoes sparks were flying, the horses' eyes sparkled like burning wax-candles in a dark night – and the person sitting in the cart was neither dead nor alive!*
> *And Bontshe stopped the horses!*
> *And the Jew who was rescued was a charitable Jew, who didn't forget to recognize the favor done for him.*
> *He handed the dead man's whip over to him; Bontshe became a horse-carriage driver! Furthermore – he arranged for him to be married, and - - he even provided him with a child –*
> *And Bontshe remained silent through it all!"*

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[151]Peretz, *Ale Verk, vol 2*, 420. In the 1894 version, the prosecuting angel's voice is described as "a soft voice like butter", which sharpens the dramatic irony. See: Zuckerman, *Job the Silent*, 234-235.

[152]Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 75.

"They mean me, me!" Bontshe became more convinced in his opinion, but he still didn't have the nerve to cast an eye on the "heavenly court"...
He listens further to the Defending Angel: "He was silent even when his benefactor went bankrupt and did not pay him his salary"...
{...}
"He was silent even when..." – begins the Defending Angel, now softer and sadder, – "when his own benefactor paid up all his own debts, but didn't give him one cent of his salary – and even then, when he, riding in a carriage with rubber wheels and horses like lions, drove over Bontshe!
He was silent throughout! He didn't even tell the police who killed him..." (Ale Verk, vol 2, 418)

This passage sums up Bontshe's nature as a passive character, one who remains silent in the face of oppression. He even receives the fatal injustice that is laid upon him in silence. This illustrates the reality of the class struggle as an ongoing battle in which only the higher classes end up on the winning side when the oppressed do not speak out for themselves. The Defending Angel says that Bontshe became a "horse-carriage driver", which in the original it reads "a horse-whipper" (*a shmayser*). This meaning "whipper" carries some irony, since supposedly now the downtrodden and beaten Bontshe has become now the man with the weapon (the whip) – supposedly he is now one of the "fortunate ones" – but in fact he very much remained amongst the wretched ones.

Furthermore, the passage portrays a particular kind of Jewish class struggle in which well-off Jews step on lower class Jews, especially on those poor Jews arriving in the big cities. Therefore the modern experience of urbanization is key to *Bontshe Shvayg*. The cold and hungry Bontshe was driven to a big city in search of work:

"...in a deceiving, wet spring-night, he arrived in the big city, he went in as a drop of water in the sea and although he spent that same night in prison...he was silent, and didn't ask why, or for what? He went out and looked for the hardest work! But he was silent!
Harder than the work itself was to find it – he was silent!
Bathing in cold sweat, pressed together under the heavy burden, by the greatest cramp in his empty belly – he was silent!
Splashed from another's mud, being spat upon from other's mouths, chased from sidewalks with the heaviest burden, down in the streets between carriages, carts, and tramways, looking death in the eyes every minute – he was silent! (Ale Verk, vol2, 117).

What Peretz is depicting here is a clear-eyed vision of the modern experience. A very different version than the one he expressed in *Bilder fun a provints rayze* and in *Iber profesyonen*, meaning the alleged promise, that if the small-town Jews would just get with the modernizing program, their situation would fundamentally improve. Here, jobs are not in abundance, and are far from being guaranteed even to those willing to work hard without complaining. And once you manage to get a job, the working conditions are low and demeaning.

There is no trace in the story of any existing social institution (Jewish or otherwise) that adequately assisting the masses of Bontshes out there; the burden of support falls entirely on the shoulders of the suffering themselves. We know that during those early years (1890 through 1897), various socialist Jewish groups were emerging in eastern-Europe, including in Warsaw. The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, known as The Bund, was established in 1897 in Vilna (now called Vilnius). Over the years, the Bund adopted a platform in which the Jewish–nationalist agenda became prominent,[153] but in its core it would lead class-national politics, not a nationalist-chauvinist agenda. Peretz presents these emerging groups the challenge of Bontshe, creating a force to reckon with out of the silenced and oppressed modern voices.

In *Bontshe shvayg*, Peretz bemoans the passivity of its main character. Peretz ends the story with the Persecuting Angel bursting out in laughter in light of Bontshe's oddly modest request. It depicts a class struggle in the Jewish society, without any call for "national unity".

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[153]See: Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: The Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in Late Imperial Russia*. See also about the Bund as part of the discussion regarding "Weaver-Love".

In order to relate to his semi-traditional readers, Peretz dressed his call for a revolt of working class Jews against their oppressors, in a familiar Jewish setting (the heavenly court, the characters of Abraham, the Angels). But Peretz's readers did not always wish to see the critical, subversive aspects of the story. Instead, many preferred to focus more on its decor. How subversive was it? We'll address that question in the next segment.

The Debates Over Bontshe

This story, as Ruth Wisse explains, was initially written with a revolutionary message, and thus appealed to radical Jewish groups. In it, all the descriptions of poverty and misery collected in Peretz's urban reportages came together and came to life in the figure of this poor, wretched, passive character, "a Job without even the impulse of rebellion."[154] However, there are a few flaws in Wisse's analogy. First, more than being just an "unrebellious Job" Bontshe lacks Job's riches-to-rags reversal-of-fortune biography, since Bontshe was poor to begin with. Peretz's story lacks the Biblical story's satanic character. And in addition, Peretz's "urban reportages", as was discussed in the first chapter, were actually based on the small Jewish towns he visited during a statistical fact-finding expedition in the Jewish Pale of Settlement and not from urban settings like Warsaw, where he lived. Peretz was likely to have encountered poverty in Warsaw, but he had not explicitly reported about it before writing the story *Bontshe Shvayg*.

Indeed, this story was used by early Jewish socialist revolutionary groups hoping that it would make workers recognize the flaws of Bontshe-like passivity within themselves as a first step toward fighting for their rights. Wisse, however, goes on to claim that the familiar Jewish cast of characters and the

[154]Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 47-51. For a discussion of the problematic Job-Bontshe parallel, see: Zuckerman, *Job the Silent*.

representation of Bontshe as a suffering saint, as a model of humility, seems to contradict its revolutionary theme. This kind of interpretation became almost irresistible after World War II.[155]

This post-Holocaust glorification of passivity can also be viewed as a competing narrative to the Zionist story in the context of the post-1948 reality, and to earlier Zionism. In 1928 the Zionist leader Berl Katznelson viewed Bontshe as "the epitome of the small town Jewish poor and the Jewish apprentice"[156], even though an important aspect of the story is the modern urbanization of the "small town Jew", and state of social anonymity of the character. For many, Bontshe Shvayg like I. B. Singer's Gimpel Tam ("Gimpel the Fool", English: 1952), epitomized the passive Diaspora Jew. This perception became common even though Singer had originally parodied Peretz's text: he portrayed a passive character in order to show the meritorious side of passivity, unlike Peretz's critique against Bontshe's passive stance.[157]

This post-1948 perception was perhaps best captured in Dr. Israel Rubin's Yiddish article from 1948 entitled: *Bontshe Shvayg oder Bontshe Shlog* ("Bontshe the Silent or Bontshe the Slugger"), in which he claimed that:

> *Bontshe-the-silent became Bontshe-the-slugger…. The coward Bontshe-the-silent suddenly became an example of the highest heroism…this phenomenon happened in the ghetto revolts and appears now in the general struggle for the Land of Israel. The Bontshe Shvayg who once represented the Jewish masses is already almost non-existent. He is dead to me, and none of us, not even his great-great-grandchildren, would say kaddish for him.*[158]

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[155]Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 47-51.

[156]*Hartsaot Berl Katsanelson (1928)*, (Israel: *Am Oved*, 1990), 35.

[157]Yitskhok Bashevis-Singer, *Gimpl Tam*, in: *Der Shpigl un Andere Dertseylungen*, (Yiddish) (Yerushalayim: Hebreisher Universitet, 1975), 33-47. And Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 359.

[158]Israel Rubin, *"Bontshe Shvayg Oder Bontshe Shlog,"* (Yiddish); reprinted in: *Problemen* (May 1973). Quoted in: Dov Sadan, "*Bontshe Shvayg un zayne Gilgulim*," (Yiddish) *Folk un Tsiyon*, vol 24 (1978): 18.

Rubin also claims that already before Hitler, revolutionary figures of the "*Bontshe-shlog*" ("Bontshe the Slugger") type were appearing in Jewish life, and that "their actions were the revolt against the *Bontshe-Shvayg* tradition". Rubin specifically mentions Hirsh Lekert, a member of the Bund who assassinated the governor of Vilnius in 1902, an act which Rubin considers to be heroic; Pinkhas Dashevsky, who raised a vengeful hand after the Kishinev pogrom and wounded the publisher of an anti-Semitic newspaper; and the anarchist Shloyme Shvartsbard, who shot the Ukrainian nationalist leader Symon Petliura, whom Shvartsbard believed was responsible for anti-Jewish pogroms. "Their actions", claims Rubin, "were the revolt against the Bontshe-Shvayg tradition."[159] Thus for Rubin, Bontshe functions as a negative example to inspire positive acts of revolt.

The story of Bontshe was dramatized to fit the American stage during the McCarthy era, by a cast and production crew who were all banned from appearing in movies and on T.V. due to their views. They used the silent Bontshe to show that they would not remain silent. Nevertheless, even in their adaptation they wove in a sense of sympathy towards the passive character.[160]

Nakhum Sokolow correctly described the story as reflecting a "general idea but with a local Jewish hue".[161] Sokolow's interpretation opposes the idea – incorrectly held by many – that Peretz had intended Bontshe to be purely a representation of the Jewish people, in which case his tale becomes merely a particular protest against Jewish passivity.[162] But in fact, Peretz himself was dismissive of a reader who was sure that the Bontshe character in this allegorical story represented "the Jewish people." Yankev Dinezon's memoir tells us:

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[159]Idem.

[160]See Adi Mahalel, "We Will Not Be Silent: I.L. Peretz's *Bontshe The Silent* vs. 1950's McCarthyism in America," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (forthcoming).

[161]"*Le-"Bontshe Shvayg" yesh ra'ayon klali, aval yesh lo gavan mekomi.*"(Sokolow, *Ishim*).

[162]Miron, for example, sees Bontshe as a representation of the Jewish people. See Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl* (1981), 340

> *When Peretz published "Bontshe Shvayg," he received a letter from one of his readers, with warm thanks for the pleasure and by the way, the reader explains, that he soon understood that in 'Bontshe Shvayg' Peretz meant the "Jewish people" which becomes so hunted and tormented - the poor thing… Peretz then handed me the letter with the words:"That's litvakes for you![163] It's good that I still live and can swear to your litvak, that I didn't have in mind the Jewish people, whom I did have in mind, you obviously know."*[164]

Rozentsvayg adds that the worker-reader understood very well whom Peretz mean: not the Jewish people, but the working people. The censor of Vilnius understood this too, and chose not to permit the story to be published as a separate book, for fear that it would stir revolutionary fervor.[165] But what was is it about Bontshe, and its "radicalness", which stimulated such strong reactions from the authorities? Why does this allegorical story, that Rozentsvayg claims belongs to the *kamf-genre* (struggle-genre), play such a big role in the development of the working-class Yiddish reader?

In Peretz's boiling times and amongst the radical milieu, a character who was born silent, lived silently, died in silence and when buried became even more silent, was not considered to exhibit any higher moral value. The moral choice is thus clear: to resist oppression.

Coda

Albert Camus believed that "no artist can give up reality," and in fact one of the basic roles of the artist is to uncover the hidden structure of reality and to suggest an appropriate course of action to

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[163]Peretz was a Polish Jew, while *litvakes* meant Jews from the 'north', meaning parts of White Russia and Lithuania.

[164]"*Y.L. Peretz Tsum Yortsayt*," (Vilne: Farlag fun Bes. Alef Kletskin, 1916), p. 19; quoted in: Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 75.

[165]Idem. And in: *Di geshikhte fun Bund*, vol1 (Yiddish)(New York: Undzer tsayt farlag, 1960), 95.

take within that given structure.[166] And that is what Peretz achieved in this story, which could be easily adapted to many languages and cultures, and its message would remain: people whose dignity as human beings has been shattered; oppressed people; those who do not know to claim their rights and ask to better their condition; all of them should take a good look in the provoking mirror that Peretz laid before them. For even the finest heavenly court lawyer cannot assist those who remain passive, lacking any consciousness of their condition.

Weaving the Revolution

Another important story to be considered amongst Peretz's "radical repertoire" is the short story *Veber-libe: dertseylung in briv* ("Weaver-Love: Story in Letters"). It was published in 1897, and, similar to *Bontshe shvayg* it also first appeared in an American Socialist publication because of censorship in Russia. Only later was it released in Eastern Europe.[167]

Weaver-Love is an epistolary short story, written from the viewpoint of a working man, a modernizing weaver who sends a series of letters to his future brother-in-law, a simple shoemaker who is more traditional in his orientation and older than the protagonist. In this series of letters, the protagonist lays out his frustration about his low socio-economic status and he articulates the plight of workers in general; thus providing a kind of a crash course in labor-capital relations. The weaver complains that poverty hurts the lives of everyday people,

[166]Quoted in: Moshe Zimerman, *Ha-Sratim Ha-Smuim min Ha-Ayin* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 52.

[167]Because Peretz was not able to publish the story "Weaver-Love" in Russia , the story was first published in the Yiddish American Socialist paper "*Ovnt blat*" under a pseudo name, and only from there it circulated back to Eastern Europe, see Shakhne Epshteyn, "*Yitskhok Leybush Perets*: tsum finf-un-tsvanstikstn yortog nokh zayn toyt," (Yiddish) *Sovetishe literature* (Oct. 1940), 108.

and expresses anger towards the economic system that created such injustice. The weaver's letters discuss his attempts to change the system by forming labor organizations.

Written in a language that the traditional shoemaker understands, Peretz is effectively communicating radical-socialist ideas to less sophisticated readers in a language that resonates with them. This epistolary structure, interwoven with a romantic plot and a great deal of irony, is what makes this text a work of art rather than a simple political pamphlet or essay.

I suggest that in relation to "Weaver-Love", Peretz uses the case of the Jewish weaver as a *literary laboratory* in which he examines the merits of pro-labor Jewish politics. The case of weavers is taken as an example that explains in a very simple language the broader question of why workers become poorer under capitalism.

Context

The story itself took much of its socialist agitation material from the brochure "Kto *z czego żyje?*" (By What Do We Live?, 1881) by Szymon Dickstein (1858-1884). "Kto *z czego żyje?*" is considered to be one of the most celebrated Marxist publications to appear before World War I; a kind of a popularized version of Marx's *Das Kapital*. The Yiddish translation from Polish, *Fun vos eyner lebt?* (1887) appeared in London and was reprinted and disseminated numerous times over the prewar years, particularly by the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party.[168]

[168]Zimmerman, Joshua D. 2010. Dickstein, Szymon. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dickstein_Szymon (accessed January 23, 2013). See also: Epshteyn, "*Yitskhok Leybush Perets*," 108. The context of Jewish socialism in Hebrew, which predated the

Dickstein's brochure includes details about the modern worker who is left only with his labor-power to sell, unlike in pre-modern times. Similarly, in "Weaver-Love", passages such as this one appear regarding the pre-capitalist days: "When old weavers assemble, people talk… only about the good old days, when the weaver worked for himself, with his own yarn, on his own stool, and sold his labor to himself…"[169]

The brochure explains how the factory-owner acquires his profits from the labor of others (i.e., by exploitation), or in the weaver's words to his future brother-in-law the shoemaker in Peretz's story: "You work for wholesale [prices] for the merchant. The profit is taken by the merchant and he gives you almost nothing from it, because others (like the unemployed, a.m.) don't have even that…"[170] The brochure clarifies the concept of "surplus value"; and in Peretz's story the weaver explains that: "the weaver's… employer… wants to profit as much as he can and thus to pay less for the work."[171]

Regarding the solution to these social problems, the brochure makes it very clear what needs to be done. Following Marx's platform, the answer is: "the entire land" and "all the factories in the entire country should be owned by all the workers, it should be their joint property."[172] Exactly how to implement this solution the brochure leaves as an open question to the reader:

Yiddish (mainly due to censorship reasons), and which also influenced Peretz, will be elaborated in Chapter 3, in the section "Socialism in Hebrew before Peretz".

[169]Ale verk, Vol 2, 495.

[170]Ibid, 496.

[171]Ibid, 499.

[172]Szymon Dickstein, "By What Do We Live?," (Yiddish) (Russia: Di velt, 1906), 29-30. And about the ways to achieve it in the modern world, when "in England alone 450,087 weavers are working now on 33 million spindles!" (Ibid, 28).

"With what means should the factories and the land be taken away and how to achieve it?", and the writer answers "That is your business, so you have to think for yourselves…"[173]

It seems that this lack of a specific answer bothered Peretz. And indeed as we shall see, "Weaver-Love" challenges the ease with which this question, which even the brochure itself considers to be "the most important question" is left unanswered. In taking weavers in particular as an example, Peretz was most likely influenced by Gerhart Hauptmann's naturalist German play *The Weavers* (*Die Weber*, 1892; 1894 on stage). The play depicted a workers' revolt based on the historical weavers' revolt in Schlesien in 1844. Peretz however did not adopt Hauptmann's unique method in the history of drama of "social characters", meaning the usage of a whole social-class of working people as one character and not just as individual victims.[174] Instead, continuing with the approach he took in *Bilder*, here again, he adopted the individual-protagonist format. Similar to Hauptmann, Peretz also discusses in "Weaver-Love" the less sympathetic and less desirable, violent aspects that such social struggles contain, in part because of the woes of the weavers themselves.

The Bund

In "Weaver-Love", Peretz gives some support to the Bund's ideological line. "Weaver-Love" was published the same year that the Bund was officially founded (1897). The specific task of the Bund at its founding was "to lead the struggle for equality of civil rights for the Jews", and to be "an autonomous organization within the future Russian party…[that] would have a

[173]Ibid, 34.

[174]Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 97.

certain degree of freedom in issues relating specifically to the Jewish proletariat."[175] The unique platform and identity that the Bund offered to the Eastern-European Jewish masses is described in this passage by Yoav Peled:

> *The bonds of social solidarity...tied Jewish workers to neither their class nor to their ethnic group in an unproblematic manner. Their identity, therefore, was that of an* ***ethnic class fraction*** *(my highlight, A.M.), connected in both solidarity and conflict to the non-Jewish working class and to the Jewish community at the same time. This complex identity can explain…why the Bund, which sought to represent the political consciousness of Jewish workers, was committed both to a class struggle within the peripheral Jewish ethnic group and to a forceful defense of that group's cultural identity vis-à-vis the larger society.*[176]

Here Peretz wrote a story about the labor struggle of Jewish workers against the exploitative methods in which they were employed, illustrating Bund ideals. Historically in the Jewish street, a general strike of Jewish weavers in 1887 is credited as the beginning the Jewish labor movement in the Pale;[177] so in this sense Peretz is also taking us to those formative days of the movement that lead eventually to its actual founding in 1897.

Peretz was also close to Jewish Socialists who were active in the Polish Socialist Party (P.P.S., founded in 1892-3). He went to some of their meetings and even gave some talks there. The P.P.S. also issued its propaganda material in Yiddish, addressing the same readers as the Bund. Unlike the Bund that sought one Jewish Social Democratic Party for all the Jews

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[175]Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 49.

[176]Ibid, 9.

[177]Ber Borochov, "The Jubilee of the Jewish Labor Movement (1916)," in: *Class Struggle and the Jewish Nation: Selected Essays in Marxist Zionism*, edited by Mitchell Cohen (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1983), 107.

in the Pale and was Russian oriented, the P.P.S. was a Polish party that pushed for Polish national independence as a basis for its socialist agenda.[178]

The Story

Arguably, *Weaver-Love* is Peretz's most radical literary text. It also expresses doubts concerning revolutionary methods. Gershon Shaked writes that the stories "Bontshe Shvayg" and "Weaver-Love" are both "sentimental Naturalism and a romantic yearning for a social revolution."[179] Shaked is correct for the most part, but he errs when he puts Bontshe and the weaver in the same category of victimhood ("Helpless victims of social circumstances" in Shaked's words). In my view these are different scenarios and characters. The weaver represents almost the opposite of Bontshe's passive nature and lack of class consciousness. Furthermore, while Bontshe is a call for action and rebellion, "Weaver-Love" puts doubt and restrictions on the actual revolutionary practice (it has to be non-violent), or at least he wishes to open it up for discussion.

What makes "Weaver-Love" a radical text to begin with?

In this story, one can detect some rejection of the ideal of national unity, but rather than pointing out the reality of class politics; the protagonist expresses his new insight to the shoemaker as follows:

> *How happy I felt by the beginning of the month blessings, when the cantor sang– all Jews are brothers! A joke, a person has seven-eight million brothers and sisters…only later I found out, that Moritz*

[178]For more on the subject see: Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

[179]Gershon Shaked, *Ha-Siporet Ha-Ivrit* 1880-1970: Vol1 (Hebrew) (Israel: *Hakibbutz Hameuchad* and *Keter*, 1977), 151-152.

> *Faynbakh, my employer, is not at all my brother, and that he has more mercy on his horse than on me! Only then, I didn't know even that, and I went towards the world so free with a smile on my young face, with dreamy eyes and outstretched hands… (Ale Verk, vol 2, 507)*[180]

This insight, which the weaver wishes to transmit to a traditional addressee (the shoemaker), starts with a common phrase from the Jewish prayer book regarding the unity of all of Israel and ends with the recognition that this sense of unity falls apart in the face of conflicting class interests. Peretz himself replaces the saying "All *Jews* are brothers" in his Yiddish poem entitled: "*Ale mentshen zaynen brider*", "All **People** Are Brothers".[181] Peretz, who had recently been employed by the Jewish plutocracy to ask the intelligentsia to perform acts of national unity, now puts such nationalist views into question.

Another technique that Peretz employs in order to communicate radical ideas to a traditional readership is that of an inner-story (or story within a story). In order to illustrate the dramatic social-economic turbulence that occurred as a result of rapid industrialization and the capitalist restructuring of his work-reality, the weaver tells the following shtetl story in his letter:

> *A sorcerer once set his heart on a shtetl and wanted to haunt and torment it, but it was a pious shtetl, full of holiness, and he had no power over it at all; so he reflected and disguised himself as a traveling*

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[180]Rozentsvayg also quotes these lines and summarizes the story as "the evolution of a young weaver, who gradually freed himself from the all-of-Israel-legend and began to understand that capitalists and workers are not brothers…and came to the consciousness, that the only way to improve the situation of the weaver is organization and work amongst the workers."(Rozentsvayg, *Der Radikaler Periyod fun Peretses Shafn*, 73).

[181]This poem was later included in Uriel Weinreich's authoritative textbook, "College Yiddish": All people are brothers\ Brown, yellow, black, white\ Peoples, countries and climates-\ It is a made up tale.\ White, black, brown, yellow.\ Mix the colors up together!\ All people are brothers\ Of one father, of one mother. (Uriel Weinreich, *College Yiddish: An Introduction to the Yiddish Language and to Jewish Life and Culture* (New York: Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, 2006), 61). It is Peretz's adaptation of the famous German poem by Friedrich Schiller "An die Freude" ("Ode to Joy"), which received a famous melody by Beethoven in his 9th symphony. See also third chapter.

bookseller, and began to sell all manner of holy artifacts and he became a rich merchant who paid with gold! It added up to a ducat for a small pack of tsitses for pious Jews, a ducat for little book of Psalms, for a little amulet, just keep it coming! He sent the goods to America, where a new place for yidishkayt has opened…

And the people believed and began to carry things out from the houses; first common people were delighted, porters and water-carriers, afterwards artisans, after that landlords, the time came for the sextons in the synagogues, cantors, Rabbis' associates and butchers… not one held out…even not the Rabbi, he also emptied out his home; for money people will get some other merchandise…

And when people sold out everything, the sorcerer took power and began to torment the shtetl with diseases and all sorts of illnesses…

And nothing exists to save you, no mezuzah on the door, no amulet on the window; no Yiddish word at home!

There wasn't any "knock on wood" to exorcise, or a chapter of Mishnah to study, or any prayer to say… and when people wanted to send even more books and opened the boxes with gold, instead of ducats… may it never happen to you…skulls were lying… lying there….

And so it happened also once with us! (Ale Verk, vol 2, 501-2)

This inner-story expresses a great disappointment from the promise of new prosperity that came with capitalist development – see the cynical allusion to the opening of a "new Jewish market" in America. It reveals what people actually got in exchange for selling out their traditional lives. The skulls, which were found in the boxes by the shtetl-Jews instead of money, represent the destruction that the Jews experienced when they sold their souls and spirits to capitalism so enthusiastically, as represented in the story by a sorcerer. These reactions and feelings contain some subtle appreciation for a more innocent religious-communal and essentially pre-capitalist Jewish life, where competition and upward mobility were not the only values to embrace.

In the quoted paragraph above from "Weaver-Love", the Yiddish language is mentioned as something to hold on to for its spiritual value. A "Yiddish word at home" is like a mezuzah, a symbolic anchor that could protect you from the ills of the modern world. In this way, Peretz injects a language-centered ideology to his imagined traditional Jewish world. In political terms, he has added a nationalist flavor to the emerging anti-capitalist sentiment. Thus, the

direction Peretz is pursuing is not one of a strict international class struggle per se, but, as argued above, it is closer in practice to the direction the Bund was pursuing, that of the struggle for the ethno-class-fraction, the Yiddish speaking-working-class.

In fact the term "Bund" even appears in "Weaver-Love". The effort "to bind a mop" (*tsu bindn a bezim*) repeats itself several times in the story, as in the following examples:

> *1."If every lone weaver is, taken separately, a weak, soft twig, who the worst contractor wraps, if he wants, around his finger, everybody together could have been a terribly strong mop to sweep out and to throw out something even bigger than the contractor with the garbage, but with what does one bind a mop?" (Ale Verk, vol2, 510).*
> *2. "His beloved girl hugged him, kissed him and wept, begging that he not foul his mouth with a mop, but he stuck to his belief, that one must bind a mop! (idem)*
> *3. "And the binding of the mop began! The crown gathered together and swore not to take work from the contractor anymore!" (Ibid, 511).*

This phrase "to bind a mop" stems from the Italian word *fascio* (literary: a bundle) which meant in 19th century politics "strength through unity". And it alludes in this case to the new movement's name: The Bund (literary: bond), and to its socialist, working class ideal of unity. The struggle for *human unity* is apparent in "Weaver-Love" when it refers to the workers joining together to resist the outsourcing of their labor to an outside middleman (*der loynketnik*).[182]

[182] "the *loynketnik*, brother, is not a manufacturer, not a weaver; he doesn't work himself, he doesn't have his own workers to assign; he is just a middleman – he takes on work from the manufacturer and gives it away to workers; namely: he stands in the middle between the manufacturer and the weaver, and as a measly bite flies from the manufacturers hand to the weavers mouth – he grabs it in the air, bites up a half portion… part of the time he swallows him completely, and but he doesn't choke…"(ibid, p. 503).

The struggle from human unity also reveals itself in the private-realm through the romantic intrigue that is interwoven in the plot concerning the workers' struggle. Throughout his letters to his future brother-in-law the shoemaker, the weaver attempts to maintain his romantic ties with his fiancée Miriam. Because he can't afford to marry her, he uses a series of excuses in order to postpone\avoid the deed. This happens to the growing dismay of her brother who is left to support her himself. The fundamental stalling-technique the weaver uses initially are his stories about the labor struggles themselves, through which we understand that the shoemaker does respond, and might be even convinced. We know from the weaver's eighth letter that the shoemaker wrote that "the middlemen need to be abolished!"[183], but in relation to marrying Miriam, the shoemaker becomes less convinced that the weaver's intentions are serious.

The weaver makes it clear by the second letter that he can't marry Miriam. This failure is directly linked to his social class. When his bosses marry, the weaver writes, they can just decide to do it with no financial concerns to limit them. Furthermore, we read that a day before his wedding and the honeymoon, the boss assembled a few young girls in the factory for a meal "and to each girl he left a gift, so she wouldn't forget him, until he comes back…"[184] While the upper classes are enjoying sexual favors, the weaver notes that working

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This description is not detached from the reality of the time. Rebbeca Kobrin writes that the "*loynketniks*, provided finished goods for the larger, mechanized factories. In return, the factories supplied the *loynketniks* with looms and raw materials." People working for the *loynketniks* earned significantly less than those weavers working in the factories and they worked longer hours. Korbin also adds that the recession years in the Bialystok region of Poland (1872-1909) "highlighted the precarious position of Jewish weavers, particularly those in the *loynketnik* system, in which employers were able to keep wages low because of the steady supply of Jewish migrant labor." (Rebbeca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and its Diaspora* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 31-32).

[183]Ale Verk, vol 2, 509

[184]Ibid, 498.

men who are honest family men must humiliate themselves and bow down to their bosses, as he sees some other weavers do. The weaver declares that he does not wish to become such a submissive, humiliated family man himself.

For Peretz, the modern-capitalist system fails to deliver human unity or social cohesion: it prevents marriages from being fulfilled, and it only strengthens the animosity between people. Modern people compete against each other, step on one another, and they do so against their collective best interests. As the weaver describes in this passage:

> *The competition between the weavers grows from day to day. One competes against the other, young people who can work more and for longer hours displace the old ones who no longer possess the strength for hard labor; bachelors, who can be satisfied with a small salary, drive away the married men and the parents, who need more; afterwards the apprentices come and drive away the weavers! And the salary fluctuates and drops from day to day… it still happens today: new philanthropists will open weaver-schools, producing new weavers each year!*
> *(…)*
> *And time will come when seven weavers will grab one boss and plead: give us work! Give! Half free, even for free we will work as long as we are busy and can forget that our wives beg and that our children help beg with them …*
> *You don't believe me? You think that everything has a limit and can't go further? I believe, work is also a kind of drunkenness, it deafens, stuns! It bangs the head with the brains and one forgets himself, forgets the world! It is also a kind of liquor!*
> *But today it's a free world! No one can force me to work; I am no one's subject! I work when I want, at what I want, - a free bird, I am; but whoever wants to, shoots me, smacks me up and lays me inside a pot. I would have been a free man, if I had no stomach that demands its due: food and food! If I didn't have to drink, to have a roof over my head, I should work on superfluous pleasant things! Oh, then I would have appreciated my work differently! But today?*
> *I want to get a lot, the employer wants to give a little; we are both free, and still, he can do without me but I can't live without him. (Ale Verk, vol 2, 499-500)*

Peretz shows us the regressive transformation of man as competition increases. From the hope of freedom and prosperity that capitalist industrialization might bring for everyone, reality reveals for the weaver a Darwinian society of lonely hungry wolves who bite one another for bread. The freedom that man supposedly won in the free market with the abolition

of serfdom is nothing but an illusion. Wage labor restricts one's freedom in the most basic material way, since the worker has no choice but to succumb to his boss's will or to go bankrupt and thus irresponsibly stop providing for the family which depends on him.

But with all this rhetoric of anger and frustration at modern working conditions and modern wage enslavement, what prospect of change, if any, do these texts offer? That is, if Peretz is in the business of offering solutions in the first place?

To correctly answer that question in regard to "Weaver-Love", one must carefully read the second to last letter in the story, which is the last letter from the weaver to the shoemaker. In it, we understand that Miriam and her brother the shoemaker are very close to losing their patience with the weaver altogether. The weaver responds to Miriam's plea to join her with excuses about not having money to travel. But the weaver's ultimate attempt to postpone his wedding is based on his attempt to renew an old Jewish society by the name of *poaley-tsedek* (Workers of Justice).

Through telling the story of Workers of Justice, the weaver portrays an alternative "true" version of the "fictional" tale he told earlier about the sorcerer. As in that story, one way or another, the people abandon their traditions and experience a social crisis as a result of capitalist industrialization. Combined with the effort to win modern Yiddish literature the same credibility among the Jewish public that Torah commentary of enjoyed during the Middle Ages, the weaver presents the following illustration of this old Jewish society:

> *There was once a great society of weavers with the name "poaley-tsedek"... people there did nothing else but pray and study commentary on the Torah during the Sabbath… Did the old weavers feel that they had to pray a separate prayer, to pray for something different than what their employer prayed for? Who knows? But with time praying almost went out of fashion, and instead of listening to Torah commentary, people strolled on the outskirts of the city and made an effort to breathe out the dust from the fabric that they absorbed the whole week… with time everybody except a few, very old weavers, the*

ones with the old prayer shawls and their silver collars – remained from the good old days. Everybody forgot that society… but lately, when the salaries were dramatically reduced out of the blue, it shocked people; there was a commotion, a riot. What do we do, how do we resolve this? And suddenly people reminded themselves that a society exists where people can gather together and speak freely! And the crowd opens the door to "poaley-tsedek", and drags me in too … the mass of people are in a fever pitch not to cut themselves off from each other! (Ale Verk, vol 2, 513)

The text suggests that the answer to today's ills lies in reviving and modernizing existing ethnically-oriented Jewish institutions. According to this passage, Jews posses the social organizational tools and the right vocabulary and strength to challenge the social order, and to do so without abandoning their unique cultural traits. Workers' organizations replacing the centrality of prayer and Torah study in Eastern-European Jewish life – that is how Peretz, in Jamesonian terms, construes the fate of his community. Though unlike Jameson suggests, Peretz is not doing it unconsciously[185]. The fight for the rights of Jewish workers through a separate movement of Jews is what mostly relates "Weaver-Love" to the new social organization of the Bund.

The last letter the protagonist writes to the shoemaker, very close to the story's final conclusion, carries an abundance of romantic irony, as it weaves together both social and romantic struggles, and finally puts the socialist theory into practice. In it the weaver discusses his attempt to stir up a social-struggle amongst the workers. But after the workers declare that they are calling for the death of their employers, he attempts to sneak out of the meeting. "I hate violence", the weaver writes to Miriam in the letter. The workers want to attack him and accuse him of being a snitch "He's going to hand us in to the authorities!" they

[185]Jameson wrote about the way literature should be read: "...all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed but what we have called a political unconscious that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community." (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 70)

shout. And now with all his persuasive power the weaver tries to convince them of the merits of non-violent social struggle. He talks about forming co-operatives, abolishing competition, of attaining a forty hour work week, "and more such things, that a sensible person keeps to himself and doesn't say out in the open. You might say differently darling Miriam? However, you always loved to refute me, to contradict me, but we'll talk about that at home! Meanwhile it troubled me."[186]

This last letter by the weaver shows how the method of non-violent struggle doesn't necessarily gain you popularity amongst your home base crowd of workers. Whether against the authorities – as occurred during real strikes of Jewish weavers in Poland;[187] or against those suspected of treason, the workers at the meeting refuse to renounce violence. Peretz is trying to illustrate that even though the struggle is for the noblest and the most just goals, it usually does not look so pretty. Nonetheless it is hopeful.

We read at the end of the letter, which weaves together the romantic plot that underlies the entire story:

> *The whole time that you didn't receive letters from me, I was in prison doing time, and God knows why? Only when people finally knew for sure that I had kept away from smacking and cutting bellies, I was released. But I was told to go out of the city for a couple of years… a weaver, they say, needs to sit and work, not to jump on tables and speak…*
> *Bad, but two things comfort me! I've planted a seed and I am certain that it will grow; from afar I see already how it grows! And it grows, as it should: in the dark, quiet and humble, like a rooster that*

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[186]*Ale Verk*, vol2, 513-515. See Appendix for the full quote.

[187]Ber Borochov, the founding ideologue of Marxist-Zionism, quotes from an 1899 article about past Jewish weavers strikes in Bialystok: "during those strikes the workers quite often invoked terrorism, broke factory windows, and were responsible for similar disorders." **(**Borochov, "The Jubilee of the Jewish Labor Movement (1916)," 106**).**

doesn't need to crow! And second, that darling Miriam's wish will be fulfilled and we will see each other… see each other very soon… Just prepare a bit of salt, to rub on my shoulders for me; they were slightly hacked…
Yours… (Ale Verk, vol2, 514-515)

The struggle for a better and more egalitarian society is described by the weaver as an underground struggle, concealed from the authorities, one that doesn't scream revolution or glorify immoral and violent actions. The goals of improving workers' conditions are not challenged not by any moral counter arguments, but only by the fist of the powerful. Those who dare to challenge the social order risk losing their livelihood, their loved ones and their health.

Using irony, Peretz spices up the hopeful declarations by the weaver about the seeds of change he planted. He does so through the weaver's very last words in the story (about the salt) regarding the physical injuries he endured while sitting in prison. Yet this Naturalist sense of irony does not undermine the overall positive stance in "Weaver-Love" towards workers struggling for their rights.

The very final letter in the story is a short and response from the shoemaker to the weaver, the first time we hear from him directly in his own words. He tells the weaver to back off from his sister, because he can't financially support her any longer, and that she was fortunate enough to find herself another man. This final outcome of the unfulfilled marriage underlines the story's social content and represents a relatively modern message for its time. Perhaps the storyteller believes that he planted the seeds for the future workers' uprising, but his own seeds will not be planted. Peretz here shows how politics also disrupt the familial structure, and indirectly suggests that social activists should seek alternative romantic outlets. Also in this ending one can find some sense of optimism that is a-typical to Naturalist fiction (like "Bontshe Shvayg"), but appears also in Hauptmann's naturalist play *Die Weber*: it portrays

people who are struggling against oppression, bear great suffering, but their souls are not stifled.[188]

Artistically, unlike in Hauptmann's drama, in Peretz's text the voice of the individual is put at the very center of the narration. Almost all of the letters are written by one protagonist. Furthermore, the epistolary genre itself was an important genre in constructing the individual, or in "inventing the human", as Bloom said of Shakespeare's works.[189] The epistolary genre represents the increasingly sophisticated ways in which fiction represented individual psychology, and it is significant in the history of third person narrative.[190] Peretz's particular usage of this genre in *Weaver-Love* comes to show that the working class is developing a subjective consciousness of its own, as well as a class consciousness.

Coda

Jewish workers worked mostly in un-mechanized factories in Lodz, Bialystok and other industrial Eastern-European centers, where the working conditions were terrible, and comprised the vast majority of workers there. The official excuse used by owners of big-mechanized factories (many of whom were Jewish) for not hiring Jewish workers was that they did not wish to honor two days of rest (i.e., to add the Sabbath), as Sunday was already the acceptable day of rest in Poland.[191] As Peled proves, this was more of a symptom of the reality of a split labor market. In a split labor market, employers want to replace higher-

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[188]See John Osborne, *Gerhart Hauptmann and the Naturalist Drama* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 136-137.

[189]Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Harper Collins, 2008).

[190]Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

[191]Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and its Diaspora*, 32.

priced workers with lower-priced workers (and Jewish migrants from the shtetl fit that bill), but then: "the higher-priced workers react by attempting either to exclude the lower-priced ones from the labor market altogether, or to turn them into a caste by confining them to lower-paying, less desirable jobs."[192] Thus "ethnicity" is used both as an argument to insure better conditions for the homogeneous group in society, and as an organizational tool for the minority group in their struggle for equality.

The cause of the Jewish weavers serves Peretz in "Weaver-Love" as a literary laboratory for examining the merits of pro-labor Jewish politics, politics which use "Jewishness" as the organizational framework in the struggle for equality. The text shows some ambivalence towards the fight itself, mainly because any fight would be likely to involve immoral tactics including violence, and also because the fight would also exact a dear price from those who participate in it. However, in the last account, Peretz's text is clearly supportive of the moral cause of fighting for the rights of the working class. "I've planted a seed and I am certain that it will grow",[193] writers the weaver-protagonist towards the end of his last letter, leaving the readers with a sense of optimism.[194] The struggle for human dignity lies at the heart of "Weaver-Love", and this struggle is thoroughly positive even if it fails.

It is also clear that for Peretz, protesting against the low status of Jewish women was inseparable from the general struggle for human dignity. Subsequently, we encounter many representations of Jewish women in his writings from the radical period.

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[192]Peled, Class *and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 9.

[193]Ale verk, vol 2, 514.

[194]This sense of optimism goes against Rozentsvayg's interpretation, who sees this story as being full of pessimism and longing "to the good old days". See Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 77-78.

Jewish Women in Peretz's Work

The portraits of Jewish women created by Peretz were significantly different from the common, stereotypical portrait of the Jewish woman in Yiddish literature where she was usually represented as the "Jewish market woman" (*di mark yidene*). *Di mark yidene* is a nag who talks too much, is foul mouthed, ignorant who possess a very narrow world view that revolves around the kitchen and the market place. This portrait would eventually achieve near perfection in the hands of Peretz's literary rival, Sholem Aleichem, whose most famous texts of the sort had not yet been published in the early 1890's.[195]

Though Peretz did not take any "radical feminist" positions in his writings, he could at least envision a positive role for women, making him slightly more progressive than other male writers of his time. In 1888, Peretz wrote a letter in Hebrew to Sholem Aleichem about the vital role he imagines for women in the new Jewish national project:

> *Men have two languages: Yiddish- and the holy tongue, but women have only one language [ie: Yiddish] so Hebrew writers need to pay attention to them. Most of the women have no occupation outside the home, lacking any matters to attend to.*[196] *The women are always the first to assimilate and to learn the ways of their Christian counterparts. Every person's soul has needs and if the needs of the souls of the Jewish woman are not fulfilled in our homes, then she learns from others and with others. These women who always stand in our way, we could easily turn them into our helpers in the national project. It is very easy to talk to them; it is very easy to teach them good things and also history. When every Jewish woman knows what it means to be Jewish, if she understood, that many duties lie upon*

[195]The outstanding example of the kind is the monologue by Sholem Aleichem *Dos tepl* (The Pot), published in 1901.

[196]This not an accurate statement made by Peretz. Jewish women, as was the case in most preindustrial societies, combined their business activities with caring for their children – both genders had to work in order to sustain their families. Women peddled, ran inns, or had stalls in the marketplace, and most working women were partners in their husbands' economic endeavors. Hyman, Paula E. 2010. Gender. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gender (accessed June 13, 2013).

her besides just the three commandments (i.e. candle lighting, Family Purity, and making the dough offering) then instead of the feelings she has now, she would find shelter and refuge from the evil thoughts which ensnare her
Therefore:
It is necessary to give women articles about the history of the children of Israel. And because most of the readers are women – this is the main goal. –
With respect, L. Peretz[197]

Like in the letter quoted above, when Peretz touched on gender issues in his early Yiddish prose story, "In the Mail Coach" (1891), the patriarchal-nationalist tone was the dominant tone (remember the Jewish character wanting to protect the Jewish woman from the gentile man). As we shall see, when Peretz addresses the issue of gender a few years later in his short story *A Kaas fun a Yidene* ("The Anger of a Jewish Woman", 1893), his female character becomes "energized" and she is given her own voice in the text, rather than being an issue to be discussed between men.

Peretz's Writing On Women as Compared with the Maskilim

In order to complete the setting for Peretz's writing on women, it is important to distinguish his treatment of gender from that of his intellectual predecessors – the *maskilim* (the proponents of Jewish Enlightenment). While the *maskilim* attacked the gender divisions of traditional Jewish society, they did not seek gender equality (just as they did not promote social-economic equality). In their effort to create a Jewish version of European bourgeois society, they advocated that Jewish women retire from public economic life into the domestic sphere, where they would set the moral tone for their families. The *maskilim* saw working

[197]Perets, *Briv un* redes (1929), 26-7.

women as responsible for the social ills of traditional Jewish society.[198] Unlike them, Peretz does not express such a dismissive view of the prospect of Jewish women working outside the home, and even before his radical years, he took a nuanced view of the topic.

At one time however, Peretz held a position close to that of the *maskilim*. In a series of letters from the late 1870's to his bride, he expresses interesting ideas on the subject of gender roles. It is clear that he has given the subject a lot of thought. In one letter from 1877 he quotes (and admits that he agrees with) the German writer of Jewish descent Fani Lewald (1811-1899), who wrote in favor of women rights:"Fani Lewald has expressed the absolute truth, saying, that "women must get such an education that would give them the possibility to sustain themselves and to avoid the humiliation of having to marry because of money.""[199] But he also writes in the same letter, referring to a brochure entitled "The Need of Work for Women" by an anonymous writer, about the gender division of labor in the household:

> *As said, people see the managing of the household as a kind of work as well. In such a way, a husband and wife, as people with free will, have the full right to divide the work in such a way, that the wife is in charge of the house and the education of the children and the husband is in charge of the business. Though I admit that if I was a woman, I wouldn't accept such a division.*[200]

In a letter from the same period Peretz wrote in Russian to his bride, he continues to discuss the topic of the status of women in light of the brochure "The Need of Work for Women". Peretz quotes John Stuart Mill from the brochure, who held the classic Enlightenment-era bourgeois view that marriage for a woman is like choosing a profession for a man. He also

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[198]In contrast, Jewish men are destined to assume their responsibilities in the public arena as natural economic and political leaders (Hyman, Paula E. "Gender." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 9 August 2010. 14 October 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gender).

[199]Perets, *Briv un redes* (1944), 27.

[200]Ibid, 28.

quoted the Russian philosopher, Vladimir Solovyov, who was in favor of women's work outside the home. Peretz writes that he partially agrees with Solovyov , and that he would have also advised every woman to seek a career in teaching or commerce (or both) at least:

> *...until she marries, as long as she doesn't have children, or in a time of trouble, so she can be a source of income, while the wife still does "her job" at their house. Pedagogy is the basis of children's education. Economy is the basis of household management. But giving this advice, I come from the general standpoint, which we accept as proven, that up until now the current division of labor between husband and wife is the most rational one and it can't be otherwise. Surely it would have seemed strange to us to see a family, where the husband raises the children and the wife travels to Danzing![201] Where the husband sings the lullaby and the wife is in charge of business. But why? Bilam's Donkey asks:"Am I used to treating you in such a manner?" (Remember this?) It's true that donkeys speak only of habits; we are used to seeing a woman as a nanny, a maid or a doll, and it is strange to us, when that same nanny, maid or a toy transforms herself into a person and begins to act as a member of the greater society! – We look on women's emancipation as the Polish nobles look on setting the farmers free – even women themselves fear this freedom, but this is not surprising; with the same fear black people responded to their equal rights; those who don't have freedom fear it, don't feel capable to take care of themselves!... the ugliest kind of oppression of the woman happens amongst us Jews.*[202]

These strong words already from the 1870's stressing the poor status of woman in Jewish society, equating them with farmers in Poland in pre-industrial times or to black slaves in America, prove that Peretz was occupied with these issues years before they were expressed in his literary work. Also, his reckoning of the fright of the oppressed for demanding freedom for themselves, resonates with what Peretz would later express in "Bontshe the Silent" regarding working people, or as we shall see in this section with "The Wife Mss. Hanna" regarding women.

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[201] An important trading center at the time.

[202] Ibid, 29-35.

In the letter quoted above, which was originally written in Russian, Peretz adds his very own Yiddish translation (he acknowledges that his Russian is not strong enough for the task) of a famous Hebrew *maskilic* poem that dealt with the low status of women in traditional Jewish society. The poem is by Yehudah Leyb Gordon (known as Yalag, 1830-1892), and it is entitled "Kotso shel Yud"("The Tip of the Yud", 1878). Its opening stanza in Peretz's Yiddish translation resonates with the way Bontshe will later be described by Peretz. Followed by an English translation of Peretz, its first stanza goes as follows:

יודישע פרויא, אים בעקאַנט איז דיין לעבן

שטיל וועלסטי געבוירען, שטיל וועלסטי פערלוירען.

דיין פרייד, דיין טרויער, דיין האפענונג, דיין שטרעבען,

אין דיר פלאַמט׳ס אויף, אין דיר וועלט׳ס פערפרוירען!

וועלן יעדערער לעבט וועלן יעדערער געניעסט,

אויף דער פרייער וועלט וועלן יעדען איז גיט

איז דיר נעבעך פינסטער, אין אייביגע דיענסט

פין שטיעב, פין געוועלב מאַכסטי קיין טריט

מיהערט נישט וועלן דיא לאַכסט, מיהערט נישט וועלן דיא ווייסט!...

אין וואָס גאָר וועלט דיין לעבען אין דער טהאַט?

דיא טראָגסט, די האָסט, זייגסט אין אַנטווייסט

קאָכסט באַקסט אין פערגייסט פאַר דער צייט![203]

Jewish woman, he knows your life;

[203]Ibid, 31.

You are born in silence, you are lost in silence.
You happiness, your sadness, your hope, your aspiration,
In you they flame, in you they freeze!
When everybody lives when everybody enjoys,
In the free world when it's good for everybody
For you it remains dark, forever to serve
You don't step out of your home, out of the shop
People don't hear when you laugh, people don't hear when you cry!...
And what exactly becomes of your life?
You become pregnant, you give birth, nurse and when
You cook, you bake and perish prematurely![204]

In the following section we shall see through examining Peretz's writings about women from the 1890's the ways in which he expanded on Gordon's protest, and the ways he innovates and takes the cause of women a step further.

The Stories

The Yiddish story "Anger of a Jewish Woman" is set in a traditional Jewish society in which Peretz imagines an all-Jewish pre-emancipated shtetl reality. "Anger of a Jewish Woman" is a very gloomy and tragic portrayal of a low-class traditional Jewish family, which includes criticism of the oppressive Jewish gender division of labor, and an opening for future change.

First, Peretz creates in "Anger of a Jewish Woman" the setting of Jewish poverty: a tiny dark house, worn furniture, broken appliances, and barely any food. A poor couple with a baby is

[204]Compare with a translation from the original Hebrew: "Hebrew woman, who knows your life?\ You were born in obscurity and in obscurity will you depart,\ Your woes and your joys, your hopes and desires\ Are born within you, and inside you they die.\ The earth and its fullness, all pleasure and comfort\ Are vouchsafed to daughters of other nations.\ But the life of a Jewess is perpetual servitude,\ Never leaving her store to go one place or another;\ You conceive, give birth, you nurse, you wean,\ You bake and you cook, and prematurely — you wither." (Stanley Nash, “Kotso Shel Yud,” *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2006), 113.).

living in it. The husband does not work or provide for the family but instead studies Jewish religious texts all day.

In "Anger of a Jewish Woman" Jewish poverty goes hand in hand with the Jewish lack of aesthetics. With humor, Peretz touches here on the intellectual debates regarding Hellenistic aesthetic beauty versus the lack of such a concept in Judeo-Christian culture, as he did already in the past. One of Peretz's earlier Yiddish texts is a very amusing dialogue entitled "Venus and Shulamit" (1889). This short story featured two Jewish students, Haim and Zelig, arguing about the moral virtues of the Biblical romantic heroine from "The Song of Songs" versus the Hellenistic goddess. Haim opens the story by asking Zelig what the word "Venus" means (Zelig answers smiling, "a mythological God". To this Haim answers, "What does it mean, 'mythology'?").[205]

Peretz posits in "Venus and Shulamit" a relationship of cultural opposition between Jewish and Greek religion, culture, and moral values. Debra Caplan writes that "The Jewish writer seeking to introduce Greek material would have to contend with readers like Haim for whom Greek culture can only be introduced into Jewish literature in order to be blotted out, and thus negated."[206]

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[205] In a passage from that story, Haim is describing the moral merits of Shulamit:"she is simple, open and noble, she can't have affairs, she can't "play around", and it hurts her that he is not her brother from the same father and mother, so she could kiss him out in the open for everyone to see! There! That is Shulamit! That is, as you see, an ideal of a true Jewish female, who has a father and a mother, not as your debauched Venus."(Ale Verk, vol 2, 15.

[206]Debra Caplan, "Oedipus**,** Shmedipus**:** Ancient Greek Drama on the Modern Yiddish Stage," *Comparative Drama* · Volume 44, Number 4, Winter 2010, 408.

In "Anger of a Jewish Woman", Peretz creates a grotesque scene of a Jewish male in the household, an image that can be characterized as a Jewish parody of Hellenistic beauty:

> *He is studying by the table…During this whole time his pale forehead creases over his nose. His long eyebrows sink under his forehead's laid-over skin, getting lost almost. Meanwhile it gives him – it seems – a kind of sting in his chest; he reaches out and pounds himself with his right hand on his left side, as if praying on Yom Kippur… suddenly he lurches his head leftward, presses the left side of his nose with a finger, makes an artificial fountain with his right hand, throws his head rightward, as a fountain squirts from the right side of his nose!... in the midst of this he takes a pinch of snuff, swings himself a right, while a sound rings, the stool cracks, the table makes a noise! (Ale Verk, vol2, 230)*

As opposed to Roman fountains where water is squirted by pleasant looking angels or magnificent animals, this realist portrayal is nothing more than a parody. We receive a physical image of "Semitic ugliness": here, unlike the fountain's angels who squirt water, our hero spews actual body fluids. To the left and to the right he squirts this "beautiful classic fountain". The Jewish male is portrayed as lacking any sense of aesthetics, or class. To add to the sense of grotesqueness, while this is all happening, the man's prematurely shrunken wife "sits and derives pleasure from her husband." So grotesque is the Jewish physical household according to Peretz.

Like the *maskilim*, Peretz was firmly against idle Jewish men who view working as *bitl toyre* (a contempt of the Torah) and sacrilegious. After the wife in "Anger of a Jewish Woman" dared to complain about their severe poverty while her man just sits and studies, Peretz has his male character slanderously murmur against his wife:

> *Hear, you woman… do you know what contempt of the Torah means? Not to let your husband study, ha? Everything is livelihood, ha? And who provides for our small child! Everything is lack of faith in God! Everything is lust, everything only this world… stupid woman…wicked woman! Not to let a husband study… for that you go to hell… (…)*
> *Hell! Fire! Be hanged with the tongue! Four kinds of executions! (…)*

Do you know what that means?.... – his voice is like angry thunder: skile – that means: throwing someone inside a pit and bestrew them with stones! Sreyfe – he goes on and astonishes himself with his audacity – sreyfe, that means: to pour into the intestines a spoon of hot-sizzling-boiling lead! Hereg is besayif … it means: your head is being chopped off with a sword… like this! And he makes a movement around his neck. Today – khenek….choking…. you hear – choking! You understand - contempt of the Torah! Everything on account of contempt of the Torah! (Ale Verk, vol2, 232-3)

In the husband's words, Jewish law – in this case the Jewish law concerning execution – comes out as a primitive, fanatical, and violent set of rules. But Peretz's critique is aimed against the people who adhere to such laws, as much as it is aimed against the oppressive laws themselves. The fact that it is a man's world is also reflected linguistically, as the husband needs to explain every Jewish concept in Hebrew to his unlearned wife, and in order for the threat to become more vivid, he resorts to Yiddish. The Hebrew usage makes the violence seem much more ceremonial and primitive in nature. The vivid descriptions of the Jewish mythological ways of killings, (called in Hebrew "*arba mitot bet din*", the "four legal methods of execution") broaden and expand the family story into Jewish epic proportions.

As a result of their quarrel, the husband angrily leaves the house for the *bes-medresh* (the study and prayer house). What happens next can be viewed as an attempt by Perez to examine the *Haskala* ideal of the woman setting the moral tone for the family. In the center of "Anger of a Jewish Woman" Peretz puts an undernourished breastfeeding woman who prefers to take her own life (a major sin according to Jewish law[207]) rather than suffer the torment of living with her idle husband. As soon as the wife is left alone in the house, her husband's violent words take their toll on her mind. After the husband slams the door on his

[207]Jewish Law permits suicide only in three cases: to prevent idle worshiping, incest or murder. One addition to these three categories was made by the famous medieval Rabbi – Ya'akov ben Me'ir Tam (Rabenu Tam). He wrote clearly (*Tosafot Masekhet Avoda Zara*, page yud"khet) that in case of expecting serious suffering and torment, the person is obliged to take his own life in order to avoid the pain (he was writing at the time of the Crusades).

way out, their sick baby wakes, but she doesn't hear his voice and doesn't move or utter a sound, until:

> *Ha! – a hoarse voice finally tears out of her narrow breast – like that – not this world, not the other world…hanging – he says – choking – he says – hot tar – lead – he says! Contempt of the Torah! Nothing… nothing for me… sobs her torn apart heart! Here hunger… without clothes… without candlesticks…there is nothing…the kid is hungry… not a drop of milk… and there – hanging… hanging with the tongue… contempt of the Torah – he says - . –*
> *Hanging – ha! ha! ha! – Her doubtful voice suddenly cries out… hanging, yes. Only here! – Soon! Everything the same! What's there to wait for?*
> *The kid begins to cry louder, but she doesn't hear anything.*
> *A rope! A rope! She screams furiously, and seeks with vacant eyes a rope in all the little corners. Where can one find a rope? He shouldn't encounter my skeleton here! Let me just get out of this hell! He should know! He should be a mother! He should! I'm a victim! An angel of death! An end! There should be an end! A rope!*
> *She reminds herself that a rope lies somewhere… yea, under the oven… people wanted to tie up the oven for the winter, it must still lie there…*
>
> *She runs towards it and finds the rope: happiness – she found the treasure! She looks at the sofa quickly – everything is ready… she needs only to climb up on the table.*
> *She jumps up –*
> *Only from above does she notice that the scared, faint child got up. He bends over his baby-carriage; he wants out! In a second he falls out…*
> *Mommy! – The kid barely uttered the word from his weak little mouth. A new anger gets a hold of her. –*
> *She throws away the rope, jumps down from the table, runs towards the child, and throws his little head back on the pillow, screaming:*
> *Bastard! He doesn't even let me hang myself! Even not to hang myself peacefully! He wants to breastfeed… to breastfeed he wants… oh! Poison you would suck out of my breast! Poison! Take, glutton, take! She screams in a single breath, and shoves her skinny breast inside the skinny kid's mouth.*
> *Here, suck, bite!... (Ale Verk, vol2, 234-5)*

In this story-ending, losing one's mind and attempting suicide are explained in part by social categories of poverty and gender relations, not strictly by one's private individual experience

or genetic flaw[208]. While the male tried to show his superiority through his knowledge of sacred books and the threat of ancient violence, the female proves that she intuitively understands those same abstract discussions. She tells him that his idleness is in effect equivalent to idol worship (for which you are permitted to take your life according to Jewish law), contrary to his claim that work means a rejection of the Torah. Her decision to keep on living in order to feed her child and not take him with her to the grave expresses a radical willingness to fight in the face of an extreme challenge. And therein lies the possibility of resistance. Since anger is the most solid motivation for political action, Peretz's angry female character is not passively accepting her fate, but is actively protesting against it. This unlettered "market wife" may well be the most radical character in any of his stories.

Peretz does not abandon *Haskala* or Enlightenment ideals, but rather, as do many socialists, he expands them. He takes the concept of "productivization" or "organic work" and applies it towards women as well, just as socialists implied that the Enlightenment ideas of the French Revolution extend beyond the juristic sense to encompass the social-economic sphere. If proponents of *Haskala* regarded women's work outside the home as something that would lead them to abdicate their maternal obligations and abandon their children to their own devices,[209] then Peretz gives us the opposite view. In Peretz's view, it is the husband's idleness in the face of the wife's reliance on him that threatens both the wife's and the children's health. The skim milk the child gets from his angry and suicidal mother at the end

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[208]The latter is used often in Yiddish and Hebrew literature. For instance the Hebrew writer Agnon explains the insanity of his protagonist in genetic and private (failed love) terms in his story "Sipur pashut" ("Simple Story"). See also the discussion in this chapter of the early Hebrew version of "Anger of a Jewish Woman", called "*Eshet Khaver*".

[209]Hyman, Paula E. "Gender." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 9 August 2010. 20 October 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gender .

of the story can be viewed as planting the seeds to grow an angry adult capable of social revolution.

The radical nature of "Anger of a Jewish Woman" becomes even sharper when one compares it to the older Hebrew version of this story entitled "*Eshet khaver*" ("A Friend's Wife", 1890)[210], a version commonly overlooked in the Peretz scholarship. At first one sees that the powerful word "Anger" (the political motivator) is not part of its title. Second, in the older version "A Friend's Wife" the social context of poverty and economic pressure is weakened as the central plot-driver, because a genetic reasoning is added (the wife's uncle also hanged himself as a result of mental illness, a fact that both the husband and the wife mention). And third, in the Hebrew version, the wife gives her crying baby her "skinny finger" to suck on – and not the skim 'revolutionary milk' the wife feeds him in the later Yiddish version "Anger of a Jewish Woman". The latter applies also to the poetic version of these stories from 1891, meaning his Yiddish poem "*R' Khanine Ben-Dose*" ("Mr. Hanina Ben-Dosa"), which includes much of the same motifs as the stories in prose, but concludes with a passive-cynical tone rather than an active-angry one. Both of these earlier versions give a strong indication of the radical shift Peretz experienced since they were written.

Another example of Peretz's protest-literature against the oppression of women is his epistolary short story "*Ha-isha Marat Khana*" ("The Wife Mrs. Hanna"; 1896-Hebrew, 1901-Yiddish, though the Yiddish version may predate the Hebrew one). It consists of a set of letters addressed to the female character Mrs. Hanna by her relatives, who constantly try to deprive her of her rights. Her husband is named Menakhem Mendel, just like Sholem

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[210]See *Ha-tzfira*, [Hazefirah], Warsaw, no. 226, 16 December 1890, p. 2; or: *Kol Kitvey*, resh"alef-resh"gimel). In Hebrew it can be read also as "*Eshet Khever*" (The Wife of Heber); alluding to the biblical heroine Yael, who became associated with heroism for her role in the wars of the ancient Israelites.

Aleichem's famous protagonist from his epistolary novel "*Menakhem Mendl*", which featured the comic correspondence between Menakhem Mendl and his wife Sheyne Sheyndl.

The character of the wife in Peretz's story is a kind of a female Bontshe Shvayg because her own letters are not published in the story, meaning her own voice is not heard. In effect she is silent about being exploited by her family members. Peretz was not copying Sholem Aleichem using the name Menakhem Mendel as a protagonist in an epistolary story (the epistolary genre in Yiddish Literature predated Sholem Aleichem by 100 years). Also, despite the fact that a great many of Sholem Aleichem's "Monologues" are told by female protagonists, Sholem Aleichem never gave a woman as much of a voice in his stories as Peretz did here and in other works.

When one first compares the gloomy "Anger of a Jewish Woman" with his Yiddish story "Sholom Bayis" (“Domestic Peace”, 1891), one might think that they strongly contradict each other. In “Domestic Peace” we find the portrait of a traditional couple, smiling and loving despite being struck by poverty. The husband tells his wife:

> *“How many times do the kids give you trouble? I myself become angry at times… Nu, do I hear a curse word from you, as others do from their wives? And consider the fact that you are proud of me. You and the kids go naked and barefoot… what am I good for? Not for the blessing to welcome the Sabbath, not for the blessing at the close of the Sabbath, I can't even sing the traditional chants properly…”*
> *“You are nevertheless a good father, and a good husband,” - Hanna sticks to her opinion, “I wish it upon myself and upon the whole Jewish people… I should only grow old with you, oh Lord!”*
> *And the couple looks into each other's eyes so nicely, so warmly, and so wholeheartedly that it seems as if they are newlyweds again…*
> *They become even happier by the table… (Ale Verk, vol2, 103)*

While it is true that it seems there is no tension, complexity, frustration or anger in this earlier familial portrait by Peretz, things are not as simple as they appear. The couple's relationship is strong. They encourage one another. And it is also strong despite their poverty. The secret to their successful relationship lies in their good sexual relationship ("*zey kvetchken zikh*"; ibid, 101). Their sound relationship serves as a testimony that for Peretz, the sensitive working-man (the husband in the story is a porter) is even more capable of leading a good family life and of achieving intimacy than a traditional man who sits in the study house or the petit bourgeois storyteller. A similar scenario to the one in "Domestic Peace" of the unhappy storyteller who tells the story of a happy couple also appears in Peretz's Yiddish story "*Der feter shakhne un di mume yakhne*" ("Uncle Shakhne and Aunt Yakhne", 1895).

The idea that a good sex life is key to a good relationship also surfaces in Peretz's ironic Yiddish story "*Mendl Braynes*" ("Mendl Braynes", 1891). In "Mendl Braynes" the wife spoiled the husband so much and gave him her all until she herself died. But she never resents him even though they became penniless. She forgives him because he did one thing right: by being a "stay at home" sort of person who was available to fulfill her desires.[211]

In his stories Peretz touches upon issues of Jewish sexuality in ways that were unprecedented in both modern Yiddish and Hebrew literatures. "*A Farshterter Shabes*" ("A Spoiled Shabbath", 1892) is an important psychological Yiddish short story example of Peretz's innovative viewpoint. In the story, a control-freak traditional mother named Seril lives with her weak-minded daughter Miriam and Miriam's young, busy, clueless and not pious husband Zerakh. Seril does everything she can to inject fears about sex into her daughter's mind. The daughter, mentally controlled by her mother, does not wish to move to the big city,

[211]See Ale verk, vol 2, 87.

where she would "sin" by letting her beautiful blond hair grow back in (religious Ashkenazi women shave their heads after they marry and keep their heads covered out of modesty). By moving to the city, Miriam also feels that she would be deserting her mother.

Influenced by her mother's readings from traditional moral guide-books such as *Taytch-khumesh*: (a Yiddish adaptation of the torah stories for women) during the Shabbat,[212] Miriam becomes sexually dysfunctional. This motherly campaign began while the young couple were still engaged, after the young couple was caught together alone on a few occasions, a behavior which is strictly forbidden by Jewish tradition. Seril, determined to sabotage the sexual life of her daughter during the weekdays, permits Miriam to have sex only during Shabbat. But it is already too late: Miriam gets her period, a time "when a woman is full with demons"[213] ", in Seril's words, and during which the sinful husband becomes especially attracted to her (according to Seril). When Zerakh returns home from prayers, he finds Miriam already fast asleep. Her watchdog Seril shouts at him just for kissing his sleeping wife hello, calling him "a criminal against the God of Israel!" The husband is left deprived of any sexual activity, hence the title "A Spoiled Shabbat" – a phrase the mother utters in the story.

"A Spoiled Shabbat" was characterized as a "humoresque".[214] The story is grounded in Jewish laws that concern the responsibilities of women during menstruation (*nida*), and can be considered satirical. In certain ways, it continues the *maskilic* confrontation between

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[212]The mother Sorel is the old Jewish female reader also because of her habit of reading sacred literature communally (she reads to her daughter) and believes in it (Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 141-142).

[213] Ale verk, vol 2, 214.

[214]Yitshok Niborski, "*Yunge geshtaltn bay Y.L. Perets un Dovid Pinski*," (Yiddish) *YUGNTRUF* (no. 7, December 1966), 9.

human emotions and a rigid, inhumane interpretation of Jewish law. But "A Spoiled Shabbat" is not a satire of the traditional laws themselves but rather, like in "Anger of a Jewish Woman", it is satirical of the neurotic people who adhere to them[215]. This is the most significant point about "A Spoiled Shabbat": the human triangle portrayed in the story sexualizes and personalizes the previous maskilic social-confrontation, without losing its critical edge in the social realm. The ways in which the story innovates in the sexual-psychological in order to criticize traditional mores does not have precedence in Haskala literature.

Criticizing traditional mores in these realms also occurs in the Yiddish short story "Muser" ("Moral", 1898), which portrays an unconventional family. "Moral" is structured as a dramatic dialogue between two female characters: 1. Grune: a widowed mother of three girls. 2. And Khane: a so-called friend of Grune.

As expected in a patriarchal society, the death of Grune's husband means a death blow to the family's livelihood, plunging them into severe poverty. During their talk, Khane tries to push Grune to be stricter and more restrictive with her three girls, for – in her view – they are "misbehaving".

One daughter was seen going out with a man in modern dress, an action likely to damage their chances at making a match with a well off (traditional) man. Grune kept this daughter strictly inside the house – where the daughter found only misery and isolation. When the second daughter worked outside the house, she did so under slave-like conditions. The third daughter is an assertive factory worker, who works 16 hours a day. The basic conflict for all

[215]Yehuda Friedlander, "Halachic Issues as Satirical Elements in Nineteenth Century Hebrew Literature," (Hebrew) in Avner. Ziv (ed.), *Jewish Humor* (Tel-Aviv: Papyrus/Tel-Aviv University, 1986), 136-139.

three girls is grounded in the “house” versus “work” contradiction. Peretz portrays the industrial working woman (the third daughter) as someone who has prospects and a potential to grow, unfettered by the old social norms, It is on this character that Peretz highlights the bright potential of the poor.

Grune, the single mother protagonist functions as a marginal social "other" who understands the changing times. She becomes tired of being preached at by her conservative and unsympathetic community, and she angrily reacts to Khane's nag of "What will people say?" Instead, she lets her daughter go out with boys. Grune says to Khane:

> *People should first have pity on poor orphans, not work them like donkeys for no reason! People should have hearts and not hold poor people to be squeezed as lemons…*
> *And God? God, blessed be he!*
> *And Grune stands up and yells, as if she wanted God in the sky to hear –*
> *God first should have worried about those other people…(Ale Verk, vol2, 531)*

Peretz tells his readers that the important struggles are those against disunity in society and against poverty, and not the struggle to uphold outdated morals and a repressive patricidal social order. In “Moral”, Peretz conveys his modern message in a conventional form of dramatic monologue, where the psycho-sexual tension is not as vibrant as it is in "A Spoiled Shabbat".

The Yiddish story “*Khasene gehat: detseylt fun a froy”* (“Married: As Told By A Woman”, 1896) by Peretz is told in the first person from a woman's perspective. Like "Anger of a Jewish Woman", it tells the story of a family falling apart due to poverty. While "Anger" dealt with a familial life that is decaying as a result of poverty, "Married" deals with the life of a young woman from a poor background before marriage. The storyteller in “Married”, Leah, is torn between two men, each of whom offers her a different life. She could be the

fourth wife of Zaynvel, a seventy-year old rich man who may have abused his third wife to death;[216] or become the wife of a young assistant-pharmacist who sings Yiddish songs beautifully, but is not wealthy.

“Married” paints a believable picture of how poverty rules over the life of a whole family and shapes its actions. In the story, Leah's father is without a job, and is in bad health. Their family suffers constantly from hunger. These facts drive the plot forward.[217] Rozentsvayg claims that in “Married” "the problem of the woman's lack of rights is presented as a social flag"[218], but he ignores the strong personal-psychological elements in the story, which Peretz introduced here to modern Yiddish and Hebrew literatures for the first time.

In “Married” Peretz introduces new literary romantic types to the conventional maskilic conflict which pits romantic love up against a traditional arranged marriage. Peretz sets his female protagonist in “Married” between two male figures. One is the secular Yiddish nationalist (meaning the assistant-pharmacist). He represents new literary type, who, by remaining nameless in the story strengthens his status as a social-category rather than a unique individual[219]. Her other option is embodied by the rich old Reb Zaynvel, a choice

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[216]Herz-Toker correctly points out to the similarity between the character of Zaynvel in this story and to another fictional Zaynvel that Peretz created in his 1892 Hebrew story "The Mute" (See next chapter). Both Zaynvels are physically ugly, and both marry the women protagonists against their will. The Zaynvel in "The Mute" though is not as old as the Zaynvel in "Married" and also he is not as nearly as rich as him (See: Naftali Hertz-Toker, "Matchmaking, Mating, and Love in the Stories of I.L. Peretz," (Hebrew) *Yeda-Am* 65-66 (2005), p. 81).

[217]Leonard Prager, "*Tnuat Ha-Avoda Ha-Yehudit Ve-Sifrut Yidish biyemey Ha-"Yontef Bletlekh" shel Peretz Ve-Pinski*," (Hebrew) in *Kovets Kenes Ha-Yesod* (Haifa: Haifa University, 1991), 46.

[218]Rozentsvayg, *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn*, 75.

[219]In the much abridged Hebrew version of the story (*Betula Niset*) the young man (the pharmacist-apprentice with the weak heart) doesn't sing secular Yiddish songs instead of traditional Hebrew hymns, but just: "a secular song." (Peretz, *Kitvey Y.L. Perets*, kuf-nun-bet - - kuf-nun-tet).

which reduces Leah to a mere commodity. Leah's marriage to Zaynvel, would offer a crucial economic benefit to her family, give her the chance to save her sick's father's life, as her father assures her:

> *You will no longer suffer from hunger, or lack anything my child; you will no longer walk around naked and barefoot, my child… you will be the wife of a wealthy man… you will be rich… you will pay your younger brothers' school tuition… they won't be thrown out of the classrooms any more… you will help us as well… I will become healthy… (Ale Verk, vol2, 483)*

The father makes no attempt to hide the sheer business aspect of this arranged marriage. Leah will be able to pay her brothers' tuition, yet the possibility of her getting an education is not even considered. In fact the situation in this scenario is worse than it seems: Leah is also threatened with being tormented by the new husband, as her friend and her mother warn her. Leah's mother tries to see the bright side in the match with Zaynvel and tells Leah's father in front of Leah:

> *I'm telling you the truth…it should be spelled out most explicitly, because a very good man he is not…it needs to be settled, how much he will settle for her … he should at least give some promissory note, because indeed, how long can such a person live? A year longer, a year longer…"*
> *\ -"If you're lucky," moans the father, – "you live long."*
> *"Long! Don't forget – 70 years… sometimes it is as if he has death under his eyes… "*
> *(Ale Verk, vol2, 486-7).*

Also the Leah's friend Rivke tries to comfort her personally:

> *How long do you think it will last? A person doesn't live forever as you know! I wish I was in your place; you'll be such a young widow! A delight! (...) He is even worse than a dog! That wife he tormented… but that wife was sick a lot. And you are healthy as a nut…he will treat you well, sure as hell, well! (Ibid, 488).*

The moral dilemma of Leah, who must choose between her family's shot at escaping poverty, and her own shot at personal happiness, is explored via the bad angel vs. good angel figures

who try to push Leah in opposite directions. Thus Peretz strengthens the inner-psychological drama that lies at the heart of the social conditions he wishes to criticize.

Peretz also exploits a recurring dream motif in "Married" in order to strengthen "Married's" basic format as an inner-drama, which takes place exclusively in the psyche of its protagonist Leah. Leah dreams that on her wedding day the young man appears instead of Zaynvel. In her dream, a young man tells her that he lured Zaynvel into the forest; put him in a sack; tied the sack to a rock and threw him in the river (Ibid, 484-5). Leah rationalizes her violent fantasy to the readers, telling them it is identical to a story that her mother once told her. In this way, Leah toys with the radical option of violent struggle against gender oppression, but this remains nothing but an unrealized fantasy.

The Yiddish Folk Hero

The story "Married" is significant beyond its portrayal of women, because it also introduces a new kind of national subject; a discussion that will also help us transition us to the last segment of this chapter. The romantic character of the Yiddish' nationalist is a new figure in Yiddish literature. Yiddish Haskalah literature made modern young characters speak with either Germanized Yiddish or in pure German. In "Married", Leah's mother states that the young character's speech is under foreign invasion: "he always throws in a few words in Polish"[220], meaning that this modern Jew speaks a "Polishized" Yiddish instead of a "Germanized" one. This change of focus is not only a reflection of the strengthening of Polish nationalism at the time, but it also stresses its innovative element with respect to past

[220]Ale Verk, vol2, 473.

romantic figures in Jewish literature. Our young pharmacist‘s mastery of plain Yiddish is surprising, as Leah says: "He came to me, took me by the chin, raised my head up and said in none other than in plain Yiddish: "a beautiful maiden like you, shouldn't go with raggedy hair, and doesn't have to be shy in front of a lad!"(Ibid, 474).

The woman in the story is drawn to the young man and is surprised that someone like him, an educated modern person, would sing in Yiddish, the people’s language. The young man embodies the type of national-*inteligent* Peretz strove to establish since his essay *Bildung*. By this point, his idea has become a fully developed literary representation.

The bitter irony at the end of “Married” is that it is the young man was found dead in Warsaw, while the old Zaynvel has been married to Leah for five years. The deep sense of irony adds an outstanding naturalistic touch in this story. Peretz shows us the ills of traditional society and especially the women's place in it; a sad state in comparison to women's intense involvement in the nascent Jewish Labor movement.[221] In “Married” Peretz presents secular nationalism as an intriguing alternative to the way traditional society relegates women to the status of a commodity. Yet noble ideas aside, Leah and her family gain more material benefit by sticking to traditional ideals and staying close to old-shtetl-wealth than by choosing the uncertain ideals of romance, physical attraction, and what is considered to be "folk culture".

[221]For example, in the Bundist circles, it has been estimated that one-third of its membership consisted of women, and that women accounted for close to 20 percent of the organization’s leadership (Hyman, Paula E. "Gender." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 9 August 2010. 27 October 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gender).

The Yiddish songs the young man sings in "Married" show how far the Jewish intelligentsia has advanced towards the *folk*, as compared to their stance at the beginning of the decade. In "*Bilder fun a Provintz Rayze"* and the essay "*Bildung"*, the modern Jewish intellectual was portrayed as being alienated, far from the people, thus unable to play a dynamic role in influencing or leading them. Peretz's presentation of the "warmer intelligent", aligned with the folk and its language, goes hand in hand with the role Peretz himself was aspiring to play – that of an "organic intellectual", someone who has committed himself to the interests of the Jewish working-class.[222] In real life Peretz was enthusiastically collecting Yiddish folk songs at the time.[223]

The story "Married" was published in one of the last issues of one of the most important Yiddish literary and political journals of the decade, which played an important role in the years leading to the Bund's formation as a Jewish socialist party: *Di yontef bletlekh*.

Revolutionizing the Means of Artistic Production and Radicalizing the Jewish Calendar in the Yontef Bletlekh

> *"It will be an organ, through which we will speak month by month to the Jewish masses. It is a portent of our happiness, that the thin Bletlekh are destined to play a big role in the development of our literature and in the education of the Jewish workers-masses."*
> *(Dovid Pinski writes in 1945 about the goals he and Peretz set out issuing the Yontef bletlekh)*

[222]Regarding Gramsci's concept "organic intellectual" and its application for Peretz, see Introduction.

[223]H. D. Nomberg, *Dos bukh felitonen* (Yiddish) (Varshe: Rekord, 1924), 190-194. See also fourth chapter.

One of the first of the many feuilletons Peretz published in his Yiddish journal *Di yontef bletlekh* (The Holiday Pages), was entitled "Europe with a Bow and Arrow" (1894). It touches upon the pacifist movement and ends on a light note, signed by the pen name "Not an Idler":

> *I don't ask anymore, what will the idlers do, when war and politics will cease to exist?*
> *Baroness Suttner wrote a novel "Die Waffen nieder!" ("Lay Down Your Arms!") And I'm thinking of writing a novel "Lay Down with the Idlers!"*
> *Just "sins of spelling"; I mean the idleness! –*
> *(signed:) Not an Idler. (Ibid)*

And Peretz was certainly not an idler in those mid 1890's years. It is safe to say that the years 1894-6 were the most prolific years of his career, both as a writer and as a public intellectual and a cultural producer. Besides the 17 *Bletlekh* (1894-6) that he issued, he also published the almanac *Literatur un Lebn* (1894), the third volume of the *Yudishe Bibliyotek* (1895), and more in other languages (mostly Hebrew).[224] But by far, the *Yontef bletlekh* is the publication that helped set new standards in Yiddish journalism. It is radical not only for its content, but it is also radical in its format and distribution methods, since it effectively revolutionized the means of artistic production.

Peretz could never have radicalized Yiddish literature in the 1890's, aligning it with the emerging Jewish labor organizations, if he had not been an independent publisher, since intellectual freedom depends on material independence. In his own publications, though they were also subjected to government censorship, Peretz could write his fiction and his biting political articles much more freely than he could under Jan Bloch's direction. Peretz felt he

[224]An important Bundist activist called these publications "the first swallows of legal Yiddish socialist literature in Lithuania and Poland"(Litvak, *Literatur un Kamf*, 122). Peretz's Hebrew is the focus of the next chapter.

was freer now to toy with more radical social ideas. Those ideas came to Peretz from getting closer to the Jewish lower classes, fueled by experience writing *Bilder*. He felt less obligated to the Jewish plutocracy, and allowed himself to be more deeply influenced by the radical Jewish social milieu he associated with in Warsaw.

Peretz understood that the material straits of many small town-Jews would not miraculously vanish as soon as they adopted modern working class professions. Working for financial magnates instead of working for the old Polish nobility (the *Szlachta*) as in pre-modern times, did not automatically mean that a brave new world full of possibilities would become the new reality. More likely, in its initial phases in Eastern Europe, modernization and industrialization simply means new forms of poverty that are more urban in their nature. In order to address these new social developments and the new ideas they bring with them, one must do more than revolutionize the artistic product itself, i.e. the text; the means artistic of production, must themselves be revolutionized. And that is exactly what Peretz achieved by publishing the *Di yontef bletlekh*.

In his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer",[225] Walter Benjamin writes about a revolutionary artist's need to revolutionize the techniques of artistic production. Terry Eagleton writing about this essay, explains what Benjamin thought it meant to be a truly revolutionary artist. For Benjamin, the revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces. In doing so, the revolutionary artist creates new social relations between artists and audience; he overcomes

[225] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," translated by John Heckman. *New Left Review* I/62, July-August 1970.

the contradiction which limits artistic forces potentially available to everyone to the private property of a few.

The revolutionary artist's task is to develop the new media – cinema, radio, photography, musical recording – as well as to transform the older modes of artistic production. It is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary message through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves. The newspaper, for example, Benjamin sees as melting down conventional separations between literary genres, between writer and poet, scholar and popularizer, even between author and reader; since according to Benjamin, the newspaper reader is always ready to become a writer himself.

The truly revolutionary artist, then, is never concerned with the art-object alone, but with the means of its production. Commitment is more than just a matter of presenting correct political opinions in one's art; it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators.[226]

We shall see that Peretz of the mid 1890's revolutionized not only the artistic-object itself – by modernizing Yiddish literature and injecting it with socialist and proto-feminist messages – but also by revolutionizing its means of production.

The Format of the Bletlekh

Prior to the birth of the monthly the *Yontef bletlekh*, Peretz had planned to publish miniature books and popular science and literature, a "penny-library" of some sort, partly inspired by

[226]Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 57-58.

other examples of such series' that existed at the time,[227] but also because of the commercial failure of his previous thick almanacs. Peretz admitted more than once in letters that his almanacs, such as the *Yudishe bibliyotek* (1891), of which two volumes came out altogether were not a commercial success. For example in a letter from 1892 to B. Gorin he writes that:"the *Biblyotek* almost doesn't sell at all. What should be done? A pity! Say what you want, it is a European publication!"[228] In addition, while his almanacs from the period expressed already a radical tone,[229] they were a very thick and expensive collection of literature and popular science.

Because the authorities made it impossible for Peretz to issue a daily newspaper (or any other kind of periodical) in Yiddish,[230] and one with clear a progressive tone would especially be subjected to censorship, he cleverly settled on an idea that would enable him to bypass these restrictions. The idea was to issue an informal monthly journal that would be marketed as a series of short almanacs, supposedly for the Jewish holidays (like Passover or Purim) or another special Jewish occasion of some sort.[231] As a result, radical and socialist messages were now transmitted via a traditional Jewish framework, namely, the supposedly harmless Jewish calendar. Originally designed to bypass censorship, in practice his approach affected

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[227]See an elaborate discussion in chapter three regarding Ben-Avigdor's penny-library in Hebrew.

[228]Peretz, *Briv un redes* (1944), 167. And see also in a letter to Dinezon from the same year (Ibid, 176) and others.

[229]Almanacs such as *Literatur un leben* (1894), where *Bontshe Shvag* was published (after it first debuted in the emerging American Yiddish socialist press), and the third volume of *Di yudishe bibliyotek* (1895) where the story *A kaas fun a yidene* was published.

[230]See: David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 21-25.

[231]Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 229.

the entire format and content of the journal. It made its radical messages easier to digest for the modernizing Jew who still had one foot in the traditional world. Simultaneously, it intensified the authority of the progressive messages by imputing them with the structure of an ancient authority.

The *Bletlekh* presented many innovations in the world of Yiddish journalism, starting with its most visible aspect: the length of the monthly. The *Yontef bletlekh* was significantly shorter than other literary almanacs of the period. Peretz's *Literatur un lebn*, for example, was over 200 pages, and the second volume of *Di yudishe bibliyotek* over 400! During its first year run of ten issues, the average *Bletl* volume ran only 16 pages.[232] Thanks to support from the several members of the Jewish community in Warsaw, editions 11-15 were able to increase size. Those members eventually withdrew their support. Dovid Pinski (1872-1959), Peretz's main partner in the *Bletlekh*, left for Berlin, an event that marked the end of the *Bletlekh*. Peretz managed to put out two very thin issues (16-17) by himself, but that was it.

Because of their length, the *Bletlekh* cost significantly less than the thick almanacs. They were sold for 5 Kopecks (Russian currency) an issue, making them significantly more affordable for the low income readers it was striving to reach. To put this amount in perspective, consider that Peretz's *Literatur un lebn*, which was widely loved and read by socialist circles, cost 30 Kopeks, and *Di yudishe bibliyotek* cost 1 Ruble and 20 Kopeks a volume.

As for the relationship of the journal and its creators with the authorities, the radical tone of the *Bletlekh* did not make it easy for Peretz and Pinski. The editorial by Pinski from the first

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[232]Dovid Pinski, "*Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh'*," *Di tsukunft* (May 1945): 322.

Bletl ("What Has Changed?"), was, in his words, "mutilated" by the censor.[233] Peretz reacted to that incident by adding a short article entitled "Passover is Coming" as a sort of compensation that also served as an introduction to the *Bletlekh*. The article says a lot about the tone of the *Bletlekh* themselves, but also a lot about Peretz's uncompromising spirit vis a vis the authorities. This is the full article:

> *Passover is approaching, and I entreat you to come to the Seder.*
> *I won't cost you much; I don't eat knaidel! Take me!*
> *Don't treat me to bitter herbs[234]; I was born with them!*
> *Don't tell me to count plagues either! I have forgiven the Egyptians a long time ago. Plainly it's like "beating a dead horse"[235]; because so far no one has become sick from written plagues.*
> *Release me also from "pour out thy wrath"... I am still too young, don't poison my blood with revenge... I hope for better times and even an idol worshiper I don't want to curse.*
> *I don't even want to say "next year in Jerusalem!" because "people don't become pregnant merely from speaking"!*
> *Meanwhile I only want to wish for you that next year you forget the whole "ma nishtana" with the "avadim ha'inu"... and –*
> *When you open the door and truly call, not like today in Aramaic: "kol dikhfin yitey ve-yikhol!" –*
> *Nobody will come in; and nobody should need to come in!*
> *(Lekoved peysekh (In Honor of Passover), 1894)*

This is a very rich and condensed text by Peretz. It is full of Passover references, thus again using traditional terms to convey his truly radical ideas. For example, Pererz plays here with Hebrew and Yiddish by putting two contrasting expressions side by side: one high and very festive in Hebrew "next year in Jerusalem!"; and the other expression "people don't become pregnant merely from speaking" which is a common Yiddish expression. The Hebrew expression "next year in Jerusalem" ("*leshono habo birusholaim*") is said on the holiest days

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[233]Ibid, 323.

[234]Bitter Herbs (Morer) are eaten at the Passover feast as a reminder of Jewish suffering in ancient Egypt.

[235]The original idiom that Peretz uses is the Hebrew "*brakha le-batala*", meaning literally "an unnecessary blessing".

in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, and Passover eve. The rhymed Yiddish expression, "people don't become pregnant from speaking" ("*fun zogn vert men nisht trogn*") effectively punches the air out of the first expression, underscoring the fact that words alone do not create action. His write off of the unfulfilled Zionist aspiration meshes with his critical position regarding the proto-Zionists circles at the time.[236]

Peretz uses the traditional Seder wish that every poor person should have something to eat on the Passover-Seder eve ("*kol dikhfin yitey ve-yikhol*!", "Whoever is hungry would come and eat") in order to call for a complete end to human hunger. He calls for an end for fighting between nations by contrasting himself to the Hebrew expression "*shfokh khamoskha*" ("pour out thy wrath"), which is said at the Passover Seder in order, according to popular belief, to invoke God's wrath on the enemies of the Jewish people.

Thus Peretz's potent radical ideas are hidden beneath so much Passover rhetoric that any censor might overlook them. His biggest parody here is his plea to his readers to "forget", which is a direct opposite of the central Passover commandment to remember. Traditionally, Jews are commanded to remember the Passover story and to retell it year after year. Instead, Peretz wishes that by next year his readers will forget the common phrases from the Passover Haggada such as the "*ma nishtana*?" ("Why is this night different from all other nights?") and the "*avadim ha'inu*" ("we were slaves"). As an alternative, he invites his readers to come and join the "Bletlekh-seder". "Seder" literally means "order" and thus Peretz is playfully hinting the realization of a new social order of justice and peace. This text strongly illustrates how

[236]For more on Peretz's position towards Zionism, see third chapter. Sholem Aleichem would maximize the subversive play between Hebrew and Yiddish in his novel *Tevye*, which part of it first published at the end of 1894; the same year that Peretz's Passover *Bletl* (beginning of spring) came out.

the branding of a text as "cultural" rather than as "political", allowed it to get away with promoting revolutionary perspectives.

The Usage and Distribution of the Yontef Bletlekh

The *Yontef bletlekh* were a combination of short stories, poetry and small articles. Much, but not all, of the literature that Peretz published in the *Bletlekh* had been written before, and was not composed especially for this publication.[237] So while one can assume that Peretz would not publish material that was dramatically different in tone from his *Bletlekh*-articles, it is also important to note that not all stories contributed by Peretz to the *Bletlekh* carry a radical socialist tone. For example, consider the story "The Miracle of Chanukah" ("*Nes khanike"*) which appeared in the 8th *Bletl*. Ruth Wisse claims that this story, which carries a secular-nationalist tone, proves Peretz's constant political ambivalence, and to strengthen that point, she downplays the fact that the tone of the journal was clearly influenced by censorship. She writes: "Censorship imposed limits on the promotion of socialism, but an even greater constraint was his own ambivalence about dogmatic social theory and the international world order that it championed. His uneasy attempt to balance nation and class resisted any fixed political idea."[238]

Wisse's criticism not only ignores the likely possibility that Peretz wrote the story before he was personally radicalized (though it is true he still chose to publish it in the *Bletlekh*), but her criticism mirrors the Soviet criticism of Peretz and of the Bund in general. This kind of

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[237]Pinski writes that it was "a monthly journal almost without co-workers. Peretz himself could fill out the thin Bletlekh. He could take from his already written material, short stories and poems, which he wrote a long time ago, and add material he wrote over-night. (Pinski, "*Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh'*," (May 1945), 324).

[238]Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 42.

criticism exposes a lack of understanding, or an ideological unwillingness to accept, the Bund's unique ethnic-class foundations. The ways in which Jewish tradition manifested itself in Jewish socialist circles is a complex issue and cannot simply be explained away as "ambivalence towards internationalist class struggle". Wisse acknowledges that the *Bletlekh* were used, with the full acceptance of *both sides*, as an agitation tool for proto-Bundist circles and played an important role in developing the desired ethno-class consciousness of the Bund.[239] The early Jewish Labor organizations who would eventually become the Bund developed their unique blend of nationalist ideology throughout the 1890's. Their program of "cultural autonomy" was based on modern Yiddish literature; much of it relied on Peretz's body of work and cultural legacy.

It is also important to mention that Peretz never deserted the concept of *Bildung*, even in his radical years. In a letter from the 1894-5 period, he wrote to the Hebrew writer Yaakov Tsuzmer explaining why he couldn't accept his text for publication: "My publications have only one goal – *Bildung*, and I cannot accept articles and short stories with other tendencies."[240] One can argue that Peretz did not abandon the *Bildung* ideal, but instead that he democratized it further, so that the term *Bildung* now included the goal of teaching Jewish workers to stand up for their rights and to help develop within them an ethno-class consciousness. Or in Peretz's words, he transformed the *Bildung* into "*folks-Bildung*"; *folk* in this case meaning *dos proste folk*, the common Jewish people, the populace, as opposed to the "Jewish people" as a whole. He wrote in another feuilleton that appeared in the *Bletlekh* about

[239]Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 121.

[240]Peretz, *Briv un redes* (1944), 192.

why the aristocrat hates the *folks-Bildung*, "Because he knows that the smarter the people become, the smaller his fat share (of the pie) will become…"[241]

Workers reading circles used to gather in Vilnius during the Sabbath prayers in the morning, or later in the day after a meal to read brochures provided by the proto-Bundist group. These secret underground groups of Jewish social-democrats would meet in a member's attic or garden. An activist named Kalman Marmor (1876-1956) who led such circles, described how he preferred to select at his reading circles texts from Peretz's *Bletlekh* rather than the official brochures that were provided by the group:

> *One brochure I rejected with the claim that its theme is not interesting for Jewish workers. […] Instead of the written brochure I read and explained a Yontef-bletl by I.L. Peretz. I heard that I would be rebuked for rejecting a brochure that was provided by the committee. Instead, however, it was actually decided that I should inform them in advance about what I consider to be more interesting to read aloud for my reading circles. Possibly it was done because my listeners were very pleased by the reading from the "Yontef-bletl" and ended up bringing many of their worker-friends to the next meeting of the reading-circle.*[242]

Pinski writes about the early days of his and Peretz's relationship with the Jewish Labor movement:

> *The Yontef bletlekh started to come out when the socialist propaganda between Jewish workers was starting to expand out from small circles to the masses and was starting to switch from Russian to Yiddish. The Bletlekh seemed like a gift from the heavens for the leaders of the propaganda effort. They prepared the workers for the labor literature that needed to be created; it was in the best interest of*

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[241]I.L. Peretz, "*In Eyrope un bay undz Untern Oyvn*," *Dos Khanike Likhtl*, 1894; also in Ale verk, vol 8, 79-88.

[242]Kalmen Marmor**,** *Mayn lebns geshikhte*. i vols (Yiddish) (New York: Ikuf, 1959), 296-297. Kalman Marmor was born in Lithuania, but came to the United States in 1906 and was involved in socialist-Zionists circles. On his way to the United States, he spent some time in London where he shared a flat with the Hebrew writer Y.H. Brenner. In the U.S. he became an active member of the American Communist Party and wrote for various Yiddish papers (most notably for the communist Morgn frayhayt). He achieved prominence as a cultural historian.

socialist propaganda that the Bletlekh circulate among the Jewish workers. After the fourth Bletl "Der Tones" and after the first attack on us in the Bletl "Lokshn", I was notified that in Vilnius people wanted to become better acquainted with us. I soon went off to Vilnius. It was summer and I didn't have classes to attend.[243]

In 1894 in Vilnius, which was then the center of the Jewish socialist proto-Bundists groups, the young Pinski met with Shmul Gozhansky (1867–1943?), a political leader and Bundist theorist. Just a year prior, Gozhansky's pamphlet "A Letter to Agitators" came out. This text, together with Arkadi Kremer's "On Agitation" (both written in 1893), was a central motivator for change in the Vilnius circles' tactics from promoting "propaganda" (conspiratorial work and comprehensive education of small circles of workers) to "agitation" (disseminating fewer political ideas to larger groups of workers).[244]

Following Kremer's analysis, Gozhansky stressed the crucial importance of raising class-consciousness and political awareness among Jewish workers. He argued among other things, that Jewish revolutionary leaders should be more responsive to the specific needs of the Jewish workers they attempted to organize and represent. The *Letter to Agitators* represents a new departure in the history of the Vilnius circles because it was originally published in Yiddish (rather than Russian).[245] Beyond publishing in Yiddish, Godzansky argued in his brochure that the Jewish Labor movement should train its agitators partly in Yiddish in order to assure their effectiveness in speaking to the workers whose Russian was poor and who were fluent only in Yiddish (or Jargon as the language was called then).[246]

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[243]Pinski, "Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh'," (June 1945), 385.

[244]Shmul Gozshansky, "A briv tsu agitatorn," [1893] in *Di yidishe sotsyalistishe bavegung biz der grindung fun "Bund",* ed. Elye Tsherikover, Avrom Menes, Frants Kursky, and Avrom Rozin (Ben-Adir), pp. 626–648, *Historishe shriftn* 3 (Vilna and Paris, 1939); Arkadi Kremer, *Ob agitatsii* (Geneva. 1897), English: *On Agitation* [1893], in *Marxism in Russia: Key Documents, 1879–1906*, ed. Neil Harding, pp. 192–205 (Cambridge and New York, 1983); and Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 34-39.

[245]Gechtman, Roni. "Gozhansky, Shmul." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 10 August 2010. 16 November 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gozhansky_Shmul. See also Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale*, 38-39.

[246]David E. Fishman, "The Bund and Modern Yiddish Culture," In: *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2003), 110.

Pinski conducted further meetings in Vilnius with other Jewish Labor activists, and they constructed a plan to join forces and distribute the *Bletlekh* through the rising network of Jewish socialist activists in Eastern Europe. Based on these meetings the *Jargon Komitetn* (Yiddish Committees) were founded. Their goal, according to Pinski, was "to publish and to distribute literature for Jewish workers, and indeed immediately to take upon themselves the distribution of the *Yontef Bletlekh* and all of the other publications of I.L. Peretz."[247]

Pinski met with others who would soon come to be known as important Bundists including A. Litvak, who played a major role in spreading Yiddish-language socialist publications.[248] Litvak characterized the goal of these Committees as "to distribute good literature amongst Jewish workers, to establish libraries for Yiddish workers in the provinces and to publish popular-science and belletristic books in Yiddish."[249]

Not coincidentally, Litvak's description is less Peretz-focused than Pinski's. There was an inherent tension during the meetings between the social-activists and political ideologues with their more culture-focused literary counterparts from Warsaw. Not only did Jewish socialists in Vilnius feel that Pinski was looking down at them, being as he was slightly older than they and more famous, but the leaders of the proto-Bundist circles in Vilnius also thought (according to Litvak writing approximately 30 years later) that it would eventually be necessary to take the whole thing into their own hands, "because after all they didn't view Peretz entirely as one of theirs. His socialism wasn't clear enough for them to understand; it was too literary."[250]

In Vilnius, Pinski also met with the socialist activist and future American Yiddish poet A. Lyesin (1872-1938), then known by the name Abraham Valt. Lyesin would become a major figure in the history of the Yiddish socialist press when he became the editor of *Tsukunft* – a pioneering Yiddish socialist journal that was

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[247]Pinski, "Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh'," *Di tsukunft* (June 1945), 386.

[248]Zimmerman, Joshua D. "Litvak, A.." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 26 August 2010. 22 November 2011 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Litvak_A .

[249]A. Litvak, *Vos Geven* (Yiddish) (Poyln: Vilner farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1925), 96.

[250]Idem.

published in New-York.[251] Lyesin writes in his memoirs how he was heavily influenced by his meeting with Pinski which caused him to see in modern Yiddish literature an opportunity to synthesize socialism with nationalism.[252]

In addition, Pinski also met with: Moyshe Terman (1872-1917), who lead reading-groups of workers and later in the decade was involved with the bundist group in Paris, London and New-York. Terman was also one of the translators of Marx and Engels into Yiddish;[253] Avrom Amsterdam (1872-1899), who was an important figure among the autodidacts in the Vilnius group of Social Democrats who created the Bund in 1897;[254] and others. Since 1898, names such as Kalman Krapivnikov (1879-1904) became involved in the distribution of the *Bletlekh*.[255]

Pinski made connections on his journeys and helped establish more Jargon Committees in places like Minsk, Bialystok, and Vitebsk. In Moilev the effort to form a Jargon Committee was shattered by informers from the Jewish community who reported their activities to the authorities.[256] Establishing the Jargon Committees significantly strengthened the nationalist wing of Jewish socialists into a critical group that would ultimately develop into the Bund.

The series of *pakntregers* (traveling book sellers) carrying the *Bletlekh* from place to place in Eastern Europe produced and developed Jewish Labor Pioneers. Most of the ideological elites of the proto and early Bund did

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[251]Tony Michels**,** *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 151-152.

[252]A. Liessin, *Zikhroynes un bilder* (Yiddish) (New York: Tsiko, 1954), 117-119.

[253]Y. Sh. Hertz, ed., *Doyres bundistn*, vol. 1 (Yiddish) (New York, 1956), 225-227.

[254]Ibid, 258-262. And Jonathan Frankel, *Crisis, Revolution, and Russian Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2009), 173.

[255]Like many of those names, Krapivnikov also had some background in proto-Zionist groups and was a Hebrew poet. Later he became a socialist, a fan of the *Yontef bletlekh*, and a very energetic distributer of them (Litvak, *Vos geven*, 110). See about this topic also in: *Geshikhte fun Bund*, vol. 1, 94-6. And Hertz, ed., *Doyres bundistn*, vol. 1, 379-381.

[256]See Litvak, *Vos geven*, 97-8.

not know Yiddish, and some of them were anxiously trying to learn it. Litvak writes that Arkadi Kremer, one of the leaders and founders of the Bund, tried to master Yiddish "as is spoken by the people". But he thought that meant mixing his speech with many curse words! At his first meeting with LItvak, Kremer, while trying to convince Litvak, that he could, in fact, speak Yiddish, whispered into his ear "You should drop dead with a pig in one day."[257]

Litvak writes in his memoirs about the first *Bletl* that arrived in Vilnius and how it was distributed even before the establishment of the Jargon Committees:

> *On Passover 1894, the first Yontef Bletl of Peretz Spektor arrived in Vilnius, entitled "In Honor of Passover". The socialist tendency was barely visible in that Bletl. But it was noted, that this Bletl was not distributed as usual through traveling book sellers and book merchants, but by young people, who had nothing to do with the book trade.*[258]

Litvak acknowledges though that in the second *Bletl*, "*Fayl un Boygn*", "the socialist character was already more distinct and on the third *Bletl* for Shavuot, "they waited as if for a dear guest."[259] The name Spektor mentioned by Litvak belongs to Mordkhe Spektor (1858-1925), who was a Yiddish writer and publisher who was involved in putting out the *Bletlekh* in its early stages. He very soon (after 3 volumes) disassociated himself from the *Bletlekh* because it indeed became too radical for his taste.[260]

Litvak became very active in forming the Jargon Committees, and he writes what a powerful agitation tool were the *Bletlekh* for them:

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[257]Ibid, 98.

[258]Ibid, 79.

[259]Ibid, 80.

[260]Pinski, "Dray Yor mit Perets," 21.

> *amongst us young half-intelligent people, immersed in yidishkayt, the names of Peretz and Pinski were holy, the Yontef bletlekh were "our Bletlekh", 1 Tsegliyane St (Peretz's address in Warsaw, A.M.) – our spiritual center… distributing the Bletlekh was our joy, received a letter from Peretz – our happiness. And this wasn't just in Vilnius.*[261]

The financial resources of the Jargon Committees were sparse and relied on membership fees and on small revenues generated from an evening in which the works of Peretz and Pinski were being read. Litvak writes about the use of the socialist circles in such readings of Yiddish literature:

The Jargon Committee used to do its readings to the intelligent youth. But at the same time Peretz's and Pinski's things used to be read also for agitators-workers and through that, it was explained to them, that they should interpret these things for broader workers-circles for the purpose of agitation. Amongst part of the young intelligentsia it became fashionable to go to Yiddish readings. In the reading-evenings the Committee used to include even young Khovevey Tsiyon.[262] The Jargon Committee used to put together small Yiddish libraries for such smaller cities as Ashmyany, Smorgon, LIda,[263] where the Labor-Movement had just begun to spurt. But most of the attention was given to publishing work. The Committee in Vilnius has reprinted in separate small books Peretz's "Shtraymel" and Pinski's "Khayim Meshores", and sold them through traveling book salesmen for 3 Kopeks a book. Bontshe Shvayg was not permitted by the Vilnius-censor. Peretz's Yontef Bletlekh stopped coming

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[261]Litvak, *Vos geven*, 83-84.

[262]Hoveve Tsiyon (Lovers of Zion) was a name for several Eastern European proto-Zionists groups that were founded at the late 19th century. Regarding their complex relationship with Peretz see third chapter.

[263]All three are towns in Belorussia that had significant Jewish populations at the time. In Ashmyny there was a famous Yeshiva and the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutskever came from Smorgon.

out at the end of 1895. First, there wasn't any money; second, the censor began to look at them with sharp eyes, so it became impossible to maintain their earlier character.[264]

The Jargon Committees existed just three years, not much longer than the *Yontef bletlekh* themselves. They put out many popular science brochures, and eventually became a center for distribution of illegal socialist material. The Bund's project of putting out Yiddish literature continued by other means (like book stores, and the publishing company, "*Di velt*"). But the pioneering efforts of the Jargon Committees, advanced by the works and personality of Peretz and Pinski and especially due to the *Yontef bletlekh*, revolutionized the means of artistic production and distribution and gave birth to what can be termed as "Yiddish Socialism".

The Content of the Yontef Bletlekh

> *"...we got used to racking our brains over a Peretz text, as over a complex course of Talmudic debate, or as over tough spot in Marx." (A. Litvak)*

As discussed earlier in this chapter,[265] the opening article entitled "What Has Changed?", the same article written by Dovid Pinski that was "mutilated by the censor"[266] of the first *Yontef Bletl* ("In Honor of Passover") – spells out the power of using ancient language and customs in order to express revolutionary messages. In it Pinski writes:

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[264]Ibid, 100-101.

[265]We know from Pinski that that *Bletl* issue of "*Lekoved Peysakh*" ("In Honor of Passover") sold 3000 copies (Pinski, "*Dray Yor mit Perets*," 21). The sale numbers of other issues are unclear.

[266]Pinski, "Geshikhte fun di 'Yontef-bletlekh'," 323.

Avadim hayinu leparo be-mitsrayim ("And we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt"), but we were even greater slaves by habit. Accustomed to slavery, we were barely torn out of there, barely led out; barely took a few steps, before we pulled ourselves back. The blacks in America also fight against the ones who came to set them free; our farmer longs also for the old days[267] *...the prisoner has at times tears in his eyes when he is set free, it is hard for him to part with his dark chamber, where he lost many, and maybe the best of his years!*

If slaves had known that they had become slaves unwillingly, that no one is born a slave, then there wouldn't have been slavery for long; if people knew that habit is an awkward and big foolishness, they would have gotten rid of it a long time ago. As more people understand this, then the slaves become fewer in number, and the habit will grow weaker.

And yet, it is not so easy. Soon people ask: "ma nishtana?", "what is different?"... And not everybody asks as innocently as children at the Passover-Seder.

It is not so easy, because for every wise son there is a wicked son, a simple son and a son who dare not to ask…(Lekoved Peysekh, 1894)

The Passover edition of the *Yontef bletlekh* was used to contrast freedom to slavery. Pinski uses the old Jewish custom of celebrating Passover in order to talk at length about the importance of breaking habits and customs, as we are all in the habit of being enslaved. The language of the Passover Haggadah is used, with its traditional Ashkenazi mixture of Hebrew phrases and their interpretation in Yiddish. The Passover obligation to ask "what is different?" is used to discuss the consciousness of people of the oppressive situation they live under. And the answers of the four sons are divided according to how much consciousness they possess, opposition to slavery or lack thereof. Pinski spells out the ratio of power at that particular time: for every conscious individual, there is one who opposes the struggle, one who lacks understanding and one who fears even to even ask the tough questions in the first place. Similar to Peretz's article "Passover is Coming" from the same volume, this story is rich with traditional Passover references, which are used to convey radical ideas even after the censor's modifications had been imposed upon it.

[267]The Polish farmers received emancipation from the nobility in 1864.

Pinski and Peretz mutually influenced each other. Pinski wrote years later about the great influence that Peretz had on him ever since he read Peretz's article *Bildung*;[268] and Peretz was equally drawn to Pinski's radicalness and youth: Pinski was only 22 years old when the *Bletlekh* came out, while Peretz was already 42. In a Hebrew letter to Dinezon from that period, Peretz confesses that: "my cherished cohorts are: Pinski, Pinski and Pinski… sometimes Frank, Freyd… and also – I myself as: Y.L. Peretz, *Dr. Shtitser, LTSFR*, "Clown from the Editorials Office" and so on and so forth, I forgot already how many names I have, about a hundred and eighty…"[269]

Peretz counts here the numerous pen names he used at the time. Rosentsvayg counts 11 definite ones.[270] *Dr Shtitser* means Dr. Supporter; *LTSFR* is an acronym for "*Lets fun Redaktsye*", which means "Clown from the Editorials Office", which is itself one of Peretz's pseudonyms. The use of pen-names had multiple meanings: they were both a tool to make it harder for the censors to track him down; and were also used to cover up the fact that Peretz was writing much of the journal himself.[271] It was the common practice of 19 century Yiddish

[268]Pinski, "Dray Yor mit Peretz".

[269]Perets, *Briv un redes* (1929), 90-91.

[270]Rosentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 184.

[271]Peretz was also known to be a very domineering editor which meant that even the texts that were signed by other writers, including by such prominent writers such as Morris Vintshevsky and the young S. Ansky, carried a heavy Peretz touch. On Ansky's first encounter with Peretz, and on his sole publication in the *Bletlekh*, see S. An-sky, *Gezamlte shriftn* 10 (Yiddish) (Vilna-Warsaw-New York: Ferlag Ansky, 1922), 152-154.

writers to use pen names in order to hide the fact that they were writing in Yiddish, but this was not primary the motivation for Peretz by this time.[272]

In the first *Bletl* appeared also Peretz's short story "*Di royz*" ("The Rose") – a text characterized by its sense of romantic-irony. Litvak writes that Peretz's readers in Vilnius got used to trying hard to understand Peretz, ever since "The Rose" came out, because nobody understood it. "Ever since (reading "The Rose") we got used to racking our brains over a Peretz text, as over a complex course of Talmudic debate, or as over tough spot in Marx."[273] Litvak even received a postcard from Peretz, who answered (in Hebrew although Litvak wrote to him in Yiddish) that "the rose is a young woman who falls under life's burden."[274] According to Pinski, "The Rose" was one of the stories Peretz did not write especially for the *Bletlekh* but a while beforehand.[275]

In the second *Bletl*, dedicated to the Jewish holiday Lag Ba-Omer, Peretz addresses the children who get out of the traditional class room (the *kheder*) once a year and into the outdoors to celebrate Lag Ba-Omer. He asks rhetorical questions laced with heavy insinuations in order to convey his message to these children:

> *Just tell me who amongst you would grow up to be an honest worker, who would live from his own sweat and blood, tell me, who amongst you would live at his own expense, not be a slacker who lives at*

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[272]See Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*. This despite the fact that according to some accounts, Peretz used about 17 different pennames in his career (ibid., 243 n. 42). He also used some of these pen-names in his Hebrew writing as well.

[273]Litvak, *Vos geven,* 79.

[274]Idem.

[275]Pinski, "Dray Yor mit Perets," 16.

somebody else's, not stick on, like a worm, with his suction-cups on someone else's belly – tell me who, and I'll give a few fine, good books to him to read[276] *that would surely come in handy to him!*

(...)

There in the fresh green forest, we will sit down under a wise old tree with long spreading branches, with millions of fresh green leaves,[277] *that promise millions of fresh, very new flowers…there we will sit down, there… in this quite place, where you can't hear the cries of the ignorant, the oxen gnashing and the dogs barking… there I will interpret to him what is the meaning of spring, what new life means; I will tell him, what the leaves tell each other in secret, what noise that the chasing water makes and how the fresh wind blows inside your ears…*

Oh! I will tell him a few more pretty stories and give as a gift – it is as you know Lag-Ba-Omer – a truly good bow and arrow…(Der fayl un boygn, 1894)

The promise at the end of the quote (which is also marks the end of the article) exemplifies perfectly the usage of traditional language and customs in order to inject truly radical ideas. Peretz is inviting his readers to come and learn about revolution from him; he promises to arm his young pupils with modern weapons adequate for the fight. A bow and arrow is what traditional Jewish children play with on Lag Ba-Omer to commemorate Bar Kokhba's revolt against the Romans in the 2nd century C.E.. But here Peretz invites his readers to a modern day struggle for social justice. Peretz could not spell out pure socialist ideas and rhetoric because of censorship, so he invites his readers, like a modern day Rabbi Akiva, to come and

[276]Peretz intentionally uses here in Yiddish the phrase:"bikhlelkh tsu lezen" and not "sforim tsu leynen" (the first means to read modern books, while the latter means to read traditional books) in order to accentuate his secular agenda. And he does it by luring traditional or semi-traditional Jewish readers in a feuilleton entitled "Lag Ba-Omer" after a Jewish holiday.

[277]Peretz plays here on the double meaning of the word *blat* in Yiddish. It means both a page and a leaf. The word *bletlekh* means "small leafs", thus the "Yontef bletlekh" means "holiday pages", but theoretically could also mean "holiday leaves". Peretz is saying here: come read my journal and I will lead you to a new Jewish spring.

learn in secret the true meaning of his writings. As Litvak says, the *Bletlekh* "were being read and interpreted in workers-circles, read more between the lines, than within the lines."[278]

In another article by Peretz entitled "The New Movement", published in 1895 in two consecutive *Bletlekh*, Peretz takes it upon himself to present to his readers the new social movement rising in Western Europe. The SPD in Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) was by then a significant political force; the Austrian pacifist organization was founded in 1891 by Bertha von Suttner**;** and while Peretz does not mention those movements by name, it is clear he is referring to them here. In the second *Bletl*, Peretz does name both the rising socialist party and the pacifist movement in the political feuilleton: "Europe with its Bow and Arrow".

In "The New Movement", Peretz's tone towards this new movement is one of enthusiasm and excitement. Its moral aspect appeals to him and if we read between the lines imposed by the censorship constraints under which he was writing, it is clear that he fully supports the movement. He attacks the philosophical strands of Spencer, Darwin, and Lippert, who, according to Peretz, view history as a series of endless wars, without any utopian sense of hope. He begins by announcing the new movement and its core beliefs:

> *In Western Europe a new movement is becoming noticeable…*
> *Over a wild-sparkly sea flies a dove with a green leaf of peace……*
> *Moral societies arise everywhere, societies that want the endless war between religions, peoples, races, and classes to stop; people should put their murderous weapons away from their hands, everybody should put away their cold evil, their egoism. People should begin to live morally, with justice, with compassion…*

[278]Litvak, *Vos Geven*, 83.

They believe in solidarity, that is not in the reflection of the shiny sword, that is not involved in Krupp's explosives,[279] *that doesn't adhere to the clenched fist and which doesn't go hand in hand with self-interest, chauvinism and religious-hatred!...*

And they believe that each person must wake up from his empty sleep and notice the light that hits him in his eyes! He must feel that he is a person, and that not the egoism with nails and molar-teeth but the pure human morality must be the compass to lead his ship over the sea! (Shabes-Oybs, 3-5 and Ale verk, vol 8, 93)

Peretz does not spell out the name of the movement he is writing about. It might seem at first that he surely means the pacifist movement because of the mention of the dove. But since he goes on to mention the failure of the liberal individualistic ethos, to criticize a system that is based on narrow interests as opposed to broader social ones, and to use the terms "ego" and "self-interest" in a negative way, it is reasonable to infer that Peretz is referring here to the SPD.

Peretz contests the concept of history as defined, in his view, by the liberal philosophers: Darwin, Julius Lippert, and Herbert Spencer. Julius Lippert's four volumes of "Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit im ihrem organischen Aufbau" had just come out in Hebrew (1894), published by Akhiasaf and translated David Frishman, Peretz's contemporary and sometimes rival.[280]

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[279]The famous family of German industrialists who, among other things, manufactured arms and sold them to numerous countries. Their brutal strategy of controlling their workers was used by Bismarck to combat the Social Democrats (Peter Koslowski and Ingo Pies editors, *Corporate Citizenship and New Governance: The Political Role of Corporations* (New York: Springer, 2011). They also had some involvement in labor camps during WWII.

[280]In 1894, at the request of the publishing company "*Akhi-Asaf*", David Frishman issued two mock *Yontef Bletlekh* which attacked Peretz's art and beliefs. There were named "*Lokshn*" ("Noodles") and "*A Floy fun Tishe-Be'ov*"("A Flea of Tisha B'av"). In the introduction to "*A Floy*", Frishman writes: "I'm not writing in order to wake you up! (…) exactly the opposite! I write because I want a few pennies; I speak so that nobody understands a word, very simply because I can't speak in any other way; I publish brochures every Monday and Thursday that are as big as a heavy rain-shower, very simply because I am incapable of writing a greater, considerable, respectable thing (…) I am called one time "The Arrow" and one time "The Bow and Arrow", one time like this and one time like that, I am a sick and unfortunate person. Apparently, a wheel blew up in my

Herbert Spencer's book "Education" came out in Hebrew the same year (1894; trans Yehuda Leyb Ben-David), also published by Akhiasaf. The book argues against public education in favor of leaving education to the private sphere.[281] Peretz claims that the theories of "Survival of the Fittest" are anything but new, describing it as a reframing of the ancient "theory of the fist", which is captured in the old Talmudic phrase:"*kol de-alim gaver*" ("whoever is strong prevails"). Peretz takes on these beliefs, and attacks their liberal and anti-social world view:

> *An endless war between people, nations and races! Everyone has to take care of himself!*
> *It is already this way, it must be this way! And it is a very simple system:*
> *The Greeks once killed sick people and defective children, so a generation of the strongest would be created; and the 19th century wants, with its fiery competition, to burn out all of the unfortunate people, so that a generation of the most cunning swindlers should come into being…*
> *Life is an endless war – whoever falls, has surely been drunk, or in the middle of everything he felt like yawning… life is a "Mokotovian pole"[282], smeared with soap; whoever attacks the other, gets a top-hat with a little watch…*
> *And with time everybody will be able to crawl!*
> *The egoism, the endless caring only for one's self, and the filling of just one's own stomach – these are, according to this philosophy, the historical yeast, on which humanity ferments, and on which it would have remained lying like a dried out piece of egg on the edge of a trough – now it lifts itself and will soon go over the edge! The "self-love", that is, according to Spencer and Lippert, the spinners, who sit by the endless wheel of time, and spin our civilization! Maybe it frightens you, that this fabric is filthy from poor sweat and red from innocent blood? This fabric comes out as housecoats, dress-coats and silk clothing for 10 chosen ones… endless war, endless competition between individuals, peoples and races; and individuals, nations and races, will fall down like rotten apples from the tree until only the most capable Manchester industrialists remain! ("The New Movement," Shabes Oybs (Sabbath Fruit), 21-22; Ale Verk, vol 8, 99)*

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brain.-"(Avrom Goldberg, *A floy fun tishe-be'ov (Varsha: Akhi-Asaf*, 1894). More on Akhiasaf and their relation to Peretz, see chapter three.

[281]Moshe Zukerman, *Khiftsun Ha-Adam* (Hebrew) (Israel: Resling, 2003), 106.

[282]Mokotow is a district of Warsaw, where a famous czarist prison was built in the early 20th century.

These strong and clear words by Peretz, attacking the free-market jungle and its intellectual backers, are the most radical words to appear in a Yiddish legal publication at the time. His writing style is urbane, direct, edgy, and knowledgeable about world affairs and present-day political and philosophical trends to a degree that was unprecedented in Yiddish letters. Its content is unabashedly subversive and it expresses a sharp discontent with the way the world is run. This time, his arrows are directed strictly upwards, towards the powerful, and not as in *Bilder fun a provints rayze* and *Bildung* towards the non-nationalist intelligentsia, or as in "About Professions" toward the Jewish workers and their "low" work ethics.

Peretz is writing to a Jewish readership in a Jewish language, but his attitude in this passage is not at all insular. He is applying universal thinking and world developments to the Jewish society he is simultaneously helping to create. He wants to lead his readers and bring them up-to-date with the most relevant political currents. He wants to imagine a Jewish society that strives to be a morally driven society like those rising groups in Western Europe.[283] In fact, the influence of Western European thinking on him is so great, that he quotes their critique of the liberal-democratic system,[284] while those institutions were not even yet developed in 1890's Poland due to the Czarist control over it.

While Peretz's world view is broad, he is directing his words and criticism inward towards Jewish society. He criticizes what he sees as the absurdity of Jews supporting the existing

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[283]In this article at least. In others and especially in later periods, he would emphasize the Biblical prophets as a basis for a moral driven society.

[284]His critique of liberal-democratic institutions resonates strongly with a critique of today's "corporate state". Peretz writes: "the Darwin – Spencer – Lippert system, or paper liberalism in general, is a blight through all of Europe – freedom means to make oneself a place at the table with one's elbows; elections, on the other hand, means buying votes for gold and liquor; parliaments are casinos, where parties swindle with political papers, where the representatives sell one another votes traded at an enormous discount… the "free press", the pride of the 19th century, is a marketplace of garbage bin and blackmail…" (*Shabes Oybs*, 8-9).

uncompassionate system of government. He wonders:"are we, we poor, scattered people, the weakest people on earth, beginning to believe that the ideal of people is endless war between people and nations, races and classes…"(Ibid, 6-7). Peretz equates this belief by Jews – which he sees as a self-defeating agenda – to: young people in ancient Egypt still believing in the holiness of the Nile, even though it was used for its rituals sacrifice of young people; aligning of the American slaves with the southern forces against those who came to liberate them; and old Polish farmers who would still rather work in a feudal order than pay taxes.

If in *Bildung* Peretz came out strongly against the alienated Jewish intelligentsia, in "The New Movement" the Jewish intelligentsia is criticized differently. First, the tone is universalist, and is based on class differences rather than national ones. He comes out strongly against intellectuals who "sold out", and who are more interested in receiving a few crumbs from the big wigs, than in promoting justice and aligning themselves with the weaker classes. He writes in "The New Movement":

> *The world of experts notes new facts all the time, new evidence regarding Darwin's system; with "kol de-alim gaver", "the strong prevail", or the free-market. These old experts have dried out brains, and are now incapable of accepting a different form. Also old and new professors – toadies, who live for a few bites that are thrown to them from the table of the rich. They must constantly stand by the wash tub and wash the filthy laundry of the rich, or dance around strangely on brushes to clean the rich man's floors, so people won't see the stains of sweat and blood…But the young, educated world is filled with joy at these new societies of pure morality, of the morality that rejects "kol de-alim gaver" and wants justice to be independent of religion, countries, peoples, classes and races; it is a new movement, that will cut the remaining nails off from us, chop away any remaining similarity to wild animals…(ibid, 8-9)*

Peretz feels a great degree of intellectual freedom as he positions himself against intellectuals who are aligned with the ruling class and must therefore accommodate its interests, like Peretz himself had recently done when he was working for Jan Bloch (though Peretz does not

openly acknowledge this fact here). It is interesting that this language was omitted from later editions of Peretz's Collected Works.[285] The last paragraph of the original text reads:

> *The old system explodes… over the altar of sweat and blood rises the axe… scared priests escape and look for older, more experienced gods, some of them run to the small tables bumping into ghosts, others want to wake up the Greek gods, to renew Olympus, others want to "spill the worm with the drink that makes you sleep" – with Buddhism, another group of people to drag the golden shoe to Rome, but the axe moves lower and lower and the alter will jump into the air today or tomorrow…and I think this will be good for us! (Ibid, 9-10).*

The Yiddish author Avrom Reyzn (1876-1953) wrote in his memoirs about his relationship with Peretz when Reyzn was compiling his first big almanac "*Dos tsvansikte yorhundert* " (The 20th Century) at the turn of the 19th century (1899). From Reyzn's memoirs, we learn that apparently just a few years after Peretz wrote the passionate words quoted above, he advised the young progressive-idealist Reyzn (whom Peretz published some of his early poems) to let his benefactor Yosef Dovid publish his poems, and additional texts of his in the almanac, in exchange for his financing of the publication.[286] Another point to be gleaned from Reyzn's memoir is the fact that Peretz did not hesitate to advise Reyzn to bribe the censor so he would overlook a few texts that were "too progressive" texts.[287] It could very well be that Peretz was talking from his own experience with his *Yontef bletlekh* and his other subversive almanacs from that period. In 1895, Peretz wrote to A. Litvak in Vilnius that

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[285]The Collected Works version ends a line before the test quoted above, and goes on for another paragraph. See: Ale Verk, vol 8 (1947), 102. It was also omitted in earlier Collected Works, like the 1920 edition by the Idish publishing company. Probably it was omitted by Peretz himself.

[286]Avrom Reyzn, *Epizodn fun mayn lebn: Literarishe erinerungen,* 1 (Yiddish) (Vilnius: Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1929), p. 246-7.

[287]Ibid, 248-9.

"Your stories are very good. Unfortunately, they cannot be published on account of the censor."[288]

But in "The New Movement", and in the *Bletlekh* in general, Peretz was aiming at the ideal of a young and free thinking group, working together to promote a moral society.

Socialism Brings Peace

In an earlier feuilleton from the second volume of the *Bletlekh*, entitled "Europe with a Bow and Arrow (A Political Feuilleton)", Peretz mentions both the socialists and the pacifist movement, and he takes an interesting anti-imperialist stand. He cynically remarks that the English would have loved for the whole world to disarm, except, of course, for the English themselves. Although Peretz's patron from his pre-radical years, Jan Bloch, was becoming one of the leading pacifists in Europe,[289] it seems that Peretz himself went further than Bloch in his liberal pacifism. In the same article, Peretz suggests that socialists have the answers on how to bring world peace.

In another feuilleton by Peretz in the *Bletlekh*, Peretz makes fun of both the position of the philanthropist and the concept of peace. He writes:

> *If I had been able to be a philanthropist, people would have pelted me with flowers and greeting cards while I'm still alive, and after my death – a giant tombstone would be built, at my anniversary memorial all the congregations would mourn for the rich guy… regretfully I became aware this year that this is no profession… I will give hardly anything for the public's well-being, and our writers will*

[288]Litvak, *Vos Geven*, 90. Litvak was very happy to read the news because it proved that his text was indeed very revolutionary, and it gave him a sense of being a martyr and a victim for the cause.

[289]See Introduction.

give me endless advice about what to do for the public's well-being… even taking me inside a mental-institution…[290]

And regarding the concept of "peace" Peretz writes:

I fear only peace! From silence I shiver scared to death...peace is between thieves, when they are preparing themselves to do their job… peace and silence are in the cemetery… silence is night and death… peace is sometimes a strong inclination to evil… oh, no! Peace is a terrible thing… peace is the lie itself. No, I don't want to ask for peace![291]

For the radical Peretz, the concept of peace means not attracting fire by toning down radical statements, peace means compromising the truth. Litvak writes that in Vilnius, his Jewish Labor circles used to read and reread this paragraph about peace, stressing especially those last quoted lines.[292]

In "Europe with a Bow and Arrow" Peretz writes about the apparent contradiction between capitalism's need for peace and stability in order to conduct trade, and the factually violent nature of the capitalist forces spread over the globe, conquering new markets and creating a new kind of "consensus" or a "peaceful world order". He cynically writes about the English empire:

For England, as a commercial country, it's very useful that wars should cease; but it's only useful for others to disarm themselves, while it could in the meanwhile grab with its sword more and more countries in Asia, Africa and Australia. It wants also to strengthen its hold in Egypt, Afghanistan and other countries. England had not yet dressed everybody with its wool from Manchester and had not granted everybody its pocket knives from Birmingham. ("Europe with a Bow & Arrow", 1894)

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[290]"*Vos zol ikh veln*?," (What Should I Want?) *Hoyshayne* (Osier-Branch), 1894; Ale verk, vol 8, 74-75.

[291]Idem; ibid, 76.

[292]Litvak, V*os geven*, 82.

Writing cynically about the "London Consensus" of his time, Peretz is mocking power and exposing the way it operates in order to strengthen and advance its interests. But for Peretz, exposing the concentration of power in the world, and holding as an ideal the equal possession of power amongst the nations, is not enough. This is not a utopia to strive for. For a world without strife means the abolition of armies and the will to conquer and go to war. He writes further:

> *But even when all of the governments have arrived at a settlement between themselves, they will still not put away their arms! Yet the Socialist Party, which is becoming stronger from day to day and is beginning, not jokingly, to frighten everyone, will still remain. Caprivi (Germany's Chancellor at the time, A.M.), mentioning the name of the party, said already, that at the beginning of the upcoming century, it would have to be taken up…and taking up, doesn't mean with empty hands! (ibid, ibid)*

Peretz might not have been able to pledge his allegiance to the Socialist Party due to censorship, but he reports about the socialists, and he offers them as a political alternative. He is presenting socialism simultaneously as a possible plan for the distant future, as the movement that would bring true peace to the world, and as a current threat to power because of its rising popularity.

Coda

Walter Benjamin, as part of a discussion he had with Brecht, Adorno, and Lukac, wrote about the question of the artist's autonomy, his freedom to write whatever he may please. Benjamin argued that various social forces, left or right, are not overly supportive of this idea. In his famous essay from 1934 "Artist as Producer" he wrote:

> *You are not inclined to accord him this autonomy. You believe that the current social situation forces the poet to choose whom his activity will serve. The bourgeois writer of popular stories does not acknowledge this alternative. So you show him that even without admitting it, he works in the interests of a particular class. An advanced type of writer acknowledges this alternative. His decision is*

> *determined on the basis of the class struggle when he places himself on the side of the proletariat. But then his autonomy is done for. He directs his energies toward what is useful for the proletariat in the class struggle. We say that he espouses a tendency. […] the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency. .. The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency.*[293]

Peretz in the 1890's made a choice: he embraced the alternative and through his work reached out to the growing urban Jewish working class. He did so, while co-operating with the Jewish labor organizers who were seeking ways to communicate to the broad Yiddish speaking working classes. Peretz's work was promoted through this co-operation – and the emphasis is on *co-operation* rather than on being "used" by them as Wisse argued.[294] Only some of his later interpreters, wishing to downplay his genuine affinity towards radical politics at the time suggest otherwise.

Benjamin further shows in "Artist as Producer", that however revolutionary a political tendency may appear, it actually might function in a counterrevolutionary manner if the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat ideologically and not as a producer. He argues that "the place of the intellectual in the class struggle can only be determined, or better, chosen, on the basis of his position in the process of production."[295]

I have argued in this chapter that Peretz was a cultural producer in the 1890's who aligned himself with the Jewish working classes. He made a genuine attempt at basing a socialist

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[293]Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 1-2.

[294]See: Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 50. Ruth Wisse later tried to give a more nuanced take of Peretz's class & nation politics in her essay: "The Political Vision of I.L. Peretz," 120-131.

[295]Ibid, 4.

oriented publication on lower class readership not directed purely to radical middle class intelligentsia. He was his own publisher of many of his publications, and later together with Pinski, he tried to establish a distribution network that was part of a production technique which was an alternative to the capital-driven publishing business. And while these efforts did not last very long, because their economic base was too weak to sustain itself, Peretz's efforts cannot be overstated in this regard. His cultural production efforts during those years laid the foundations for an array of Yiddish oriented progressive Jewish groups.[296] And more directly, his efforts in the 1890's laid the foundation for the establishment of one of the most important modern political parties to emerge out of the Eastern European Jewish world – The Bund.

Appendix

This segment is taken from the story "Weavers Love", very close to its final conclusion. In it the weaver-protagonist discusses his attempt to stir up a social-struggle amongst the workers:

> *Have you ever seen how sparks fly over a smithy? Millions of sparks, and they won't light even one straw on the thatched-roof! But take them together, they will burn a world! Society is the same! Barely did the crowd gather together, than it burned! Deaf people heard, the mute spoke, lame people were running everywhere, the paralyzed wanted to hit, only to hit others were screaming, so that as long as the bellies of two or three employers remained not torn apart in the middle of the market place, the troubles will not end!*
> *I hate violence: by my nature I can't hear bellies being torn up, and I want to sneak myself out of the crowd with its sharp tongues and blunted heads; unfortunately, people took notice of me and it suddenly became a clamor: he escapes! He's going to hand us in to the authorities! To hand us in! And these words were enough to make me want to go back, to jump up on the first table and begin to talk, as if also I had something missing in the head and my heart had also grown bigger in all directions.*

[296]See in this regard Emanuel S. Goldsmith's essay about Peretz's Jewish cultural and political legacy: "A Modern Judaism for the Yiddish World," in: *Enduring Legacy of Yitzchok L. Peretz* (New York: Center for Jewish Studies CUNY, 2005), p. 21-29.

Should tell you my stupid words? For what? I only wanted the weavers to understand their own place of work, to make them realize, that first they must hold together firmly, that the "poaley-tsedek" has to be refreshed and become stronger, that they must collect money, money for the sick, money for the old without strength, for the weaver without a job, money for everybody in a difficult period, when it doesn't pay to work…and the main thing is that the weavers never have to compete against one another, not with income, not with prolonging the hours of work… I told them, that somewhere else people work only 12 hours, abroad only 10 hours, in a few places only 8. I told them, that a person is not a horse, and that as we know, horses work less than the laziest weaver… and more such things, that a sensible person keeps to himself and doesn't say out in the open. You might say differently darling Miriam? However, you always loved to refute me, to contradict me, but we'll talk about that at home! Meanwhile it troubled me.

The whole time that you didn't receive letters from me, I did time, and God knows why? Only when people finally know for sure that I kept away from smacking and cutting bellies. I was released, but I was told to go out of the city for a couple of years… a weaver, they say, needs to sit and work, not to jump on tables and speak…

Bad, but two things comfort me! I've planted a seed and I am certain that it will grow; from afar I see already how it grows! And it grows, as it should: in the dark, quite and humble, like a rooster that doesn't need to crow! And second, that darling Miriam wish will be fulfilled and we will see each other… see each other very soon… Just prepare a bit of salt, to rub on my shoulders for me; they were slightly chopped…

Yours….(Ale Verk, vol2, 513-515)

Chapter 3: To Be A Fighter With Both Fists!

Peretz the Radical Hebrew Writer

To The Reader!
I did not come to for an afternoon chat; nor did I come to please you.
I have no desire to be your pleasure-reading and entertainment, nor your sleeping pill.
I am not a glass of wine in which to drown your worries or waste the time which you failed to use.
I am no potion for strengthening the bones, no healing drug to calm the nerves and not the hope of lazy people, which deceives, which plays with the dusk shadows, to weave from them all that your heart desires!
I am no false witness for hire, to wave my head for all of your twists of thought; and not an advocate for the blood that will be found on your clothes; and for no reason will I purify the wrong which will be in your heart in the lake of delusions…
I desire the opposite, to throw myself on you and to rule over you.
I desire to cleave your heart, to crush your brain, to stir all of your nerves and to deprive you of your sleep… I desire to tear down your blinders with the strength of my hand, to add bitterness to your anguish and to give a great sound – the sound of the bell ringing in your conscience, until you become shocked and astonished from hearing it…
This is my wish and my desire.
The Arrow
(I.L. Peretz, 1894, in the opening page of his Hebrew journal "The Arrow")

Radical Hebrew Arrows

Following the success of the Yiddish *Yontef bletlekh* journals, Peretz attempted to produce a similar publication in tone and format, but this time in Hebrew. The journal *The Arrow* came out only once, in May of 1894. It was a thin, low-priced volume, mainly comprised of literary prose, poems, and essays contributed by Peretz, who was also the editor.[297] Dovid Pinski, his

[297]His personal secretary at the time, Meir Jacob Fried (1871-1940), writes in his memoirs that being a Zionist loyal to the Hebrew language, it was hard for him personally to contribute to Peretz's Yiddish almanac at the

cofounder and co-creator of the *Yontef bletlekh*, wrote about their attempt to produce a Hebrew version of the *Bletlekh*:

The success of the *Yontef bletlekh* and Peretz's rise moved his old friend and admirer, the Hebrew publisher S.B. Shvartsberg,[298] to begin publishing such *Bletlekh* in Hebrew. When he came to Peretz with his plan, Peretz was enthusiastic. Both languages were one in him. To derive satisfaction simultaneously in both languages, such joy! Such a thing! To be a fighter with both fists! In the shortest time he assembled a bletl under the title *Ha-khets* (The Arrow). The title echoes the militancy in him. But in the Hebrew world, *Ha-khets* did not receive response, as the *bletl Fayl fun boygn* (the second volume of the *Bletlekh*, also 1894) did in the Yiddish world. The inspired Shvartsberg quickly cooled off, and a second volume was never published.[299]

If in Yiddish, the radical Peretz found some political backing from the nascent Jewish labor movement, in Hebrew his radical streak rendered him an odd bird, as Pinski implies. In Hebrew circles, Peretz had as political enemies the proto-Zionists who were becoming increasingly dominant in the Hebrew cultural field they inherited from the Haskalah.

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time (meaning the almanac Literature and Life, 1894). "But at the same time", he writes, "in the Hebrew collection "The Arrow" I contributed quite a few literary works, occupying almost a half of the entire booklet." (Meir Yaakov Fried, Yamim ve-shanim: Zikhronot ve-tziyurim mi-tekufah shel hamishim shanah (Days and years: Memoirs and vignettes from a fifty-year period). Vol. 2 (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1939), 74). There is no other evidence Fried's claim, though it doesn't seem farfetched to assume that Peretz was indeed enjoying his help, at least in editing the volume. Officially though, Fried is credited in *The Arrow* only as the translator of a short story by Alexander Kielland, "A Peat Moor". In *Literature and Life* he contributed a captivating Yiddish story told from the point of view of a dog ("Murza") and to the *Yontef bletlekh* he contributed "Liza", told from a point of view of a cow (See: *Der tones*, 1894).

[298]Shmuel Binyamin Shvartsberg (1865-1929) was a Hebrew publisher who lived in Warsaw around the same time as Peretz did. In 1897 he migrated to America where he continued to work as a publisher, a bookseller in the Lower East side, and as a bibliographer of several Hebrew writers (Jacob Kabakoff, *Shoharim V'ne'emanim*, (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1978), 138-147).

[299]Pinski, "Dray yor mit Y.L. Perets," 18.

Displeased by Peretz's radical publications, they launched an open war against him, through publications such as David Frishman's mock *Bletlekh*, which mocked all of Peretz's publications, including *The Arrow*). The fact that Peretz's radical Hebrew work did not find its way into the hearts of the Hebrew intelligentsia surely made it easier for his political enemies to discount him.

But even this singular attempt gained some attention from Hebrew writers with a conservative agenda. An anonymous writer for the Hebrew daily *Ha-melitz* wrote a double cover-page review article of *The Arrow* with the title *Nitabain La-egel Ve-notnim* ("Demanded to Contribute to the Calf and Provide"), which had a threatening, "witch-hunt" tone to it. The article threatened to expose the names of the benefactors who allegedly funded Peretz's publications like the *Bletlekh* and *The Arrow*, because, he argues, they were themselves financially unsustainable. That anonymous attacker writes about "The Arrow":

> *The new Yiddish books (the Bletlekh, A.M.) are many, and we can find in them many examples showing how they are fueled with burning anger, anger to burn the soul and encourage wrong doing. But the reader would not tolerate these words as they appear in Yiddish, and as for translating them, everybody knows that one should not trust translation too much when it comes to illustrating the opinion of the writer. And that is why we should hold it in favor of one of the creators of these "bell letters", for he gave us its gist in Hebrew, and "The Arrow" is a collection of all that is written in these new Yiddish books.*[300] *"The Arrow" is smeared with the poison which is in those books, and its deathly lightning is the deceitful light which is this new Yiddish literature.*[301]

The "clear things" are taken from the editorial of "The Arrow" ("my will and my desire"), quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The anonymous writer suggests that a journal like "The Arrow" is out of place in Hebrew literature, and would be better suited to Yiddish

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[300]The writer uses the pejorative term "jargon", for Yiddish.

[301]"Nitabin Le-egel Ve-notnim," *Ha-Melitz* 156 (1894) (Hebrew). See also a two part review article in the same year by Avraham Zinger, also in *Ha-melitz* 179.

literature. In fact, he claims "The Arrow" is a kind of poor translation from Yiddish literature, and one should stick to the original. He writes as if being written in the "holy tongue" is some kind of an intolerable anomaly for radical ideas to a conservative and pious readership. This anonymous allegation prompted Peretz to respond a week later on the front page of *Ha-melitz* under the title "Denial" as follows:

> *"In the main article of Ha-melitz- it has been said of my publications … that they have a hidden goal (insinuated in the article), that they don't have any readers, and thus if it weren't for the help of the benefactors that they couldn't be issued. The writer of the article threatened these benefactors, implying that if they won't cease from supporting my books, he will denounce them by name for everyone to see. And all this is untrue. The little books:"Yontef Bletlekh" I published at my own expense without any outside assistance. As for "Literature and Life", the first edition was published by the book salesman Yitshak Funk from Vilna, who bought all 3,000 copies. The Arrow was printed by the publisher S"B Shvartsberg from Lifna at his own expense … and the purpose of all my books is strictly the distribution of straightforward knowledge amongst the people. All my books have sold in the thousands." Signed: Y.L. Peretz"*[302]

Peretz's description of himself as a distributor of "straightforward knowledge amongst the people", defines his essence as a radical intellectual: he popularizes complex ideas, making them accessible even to the uneducated. This is Peretz aligning himself with the interests of the Jewish working class.

Jewish socialists, who were starting to organize workers' circles using the Yiddish material produced by Peretz and Pinski in the *Yontef Bletlekh*, indeed took notice of the attempt to create a Hebrew radical counterpart to the *Bletlekh*. According to the major figures of the Jewish left, workers loved hearing the material written in Hebrew when it was translated for them into Yiddish. A. Litvak, the proto-Bundist pioneer of the Jargon Committees, describes the reaction to *The Arrow* when it came out towards the end of 1894:

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[302]I.L. Peretz, "Denial," *Ha-Melitz* 169 (1894) (Hebrew).

Our half inteligentn[303] *were strong opponents of Hebrew however, we still read everything new which came out in that language. We immediately threw ourselves at Peretz's "Ha-chetz"; in which there appeared a poignant article against the Palestinian idea, under the name "Yotsrey Tohu" (Creators of Chaos), signed by Amittai. In Grekenzon's club people said that this article was written by Nahum Sokolow, who at the time was not a Zionist and often when he wrote in "Ha-tsfira" and in "Ha-asif"*[304] *– would give to The Choveve Zion movement*[305] *a soft sting, although he never had the nerve to go for an open attack. Later I was told that this article was written by Peretz himself. From the temperament that spouts from every line it's clear that it's true.*[306] *As it is, this article gave us a poignant weapon against The Choveve Zion movement. In the same collection of books there were two nice revolutionary stories by Peretz "The Thought" and "The Violin". Long afterwards M. Frumkin from London translated them into Yiddish… and published them in a collection of translations of Peretz: "The Eighth Section in Hell". Almost everything that was in that collection was later recreated by Peretz himself in Yiddish. These two fine stories unfortunately remained with us only in Frumkin's wooden translation. I used to tell them with my own words in workmen's circles where they always enjoyed a great success.*[307]

Some interesting insights into the Yiddish-Hebrew cultural-political dynamic are revealed in this passage. First, it is clear that Peretz succeeded in creating in Hebrew the same radical spirit, so admired by Jewish labor organizers, as he did in Yiddish. The second more obvious point –is the affirmation of the fact that Hebrew was inherently much less accessible to the masses than Yiddish was. Just like in Jewish religious circles, Hebrew required cultural agents to mediate its content to most working-class Jews. A third point is that although the Jewish labor circles were starting to adapt Yiddish and a *yidishist* platform (Litvak first

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[303]The "half *inteligentn*" ("half intellectuals"), was the term used for the Jewish intellectuals who were not fully assimilated in non-Jewish society and who did not go to a prestigious university. They were mobilized by the leaders of the Social Democratic Jews to agitate in Yiddish, and they were the organizers of the Jargon Committees (see second chapter).

[304]Hebrew publications of the time that were edited by Sokolow and published in Warsaw.

[305]The proto-Zionist group "Lovers of Zion", active in Eastern Europe in the 1880's-1890's until the establishment of political Zionism in 1897. More on this topic further in this chapter.

[306]In fact, the article was written by Sokolow. See further in this chapter.

[307]Litvak, *Vos geven,* 85.

published these lines in 1921,[308] a period when the split between Yiddish and Hebrew was already an established fact), only the very first signs of the Hebrew-Yiddish split were beginning to appear in the 1890's amongst Jewish intelligentsia circles.[309] So, reluctantly, Litvak admits in the early 1920's that they read everything that came out in Hebrew as well.

The politics of translation also plays a role here: between Frumkin's weak translation and Peretz's inaccessible authentic version, Litvak had to spontaneously tell the tale "in his own words". Litvak's ability to spontaneously translate a Hebrew text into spoken Yiddish shows how tightly Hebrew and Yiddish cultures were still intertwined amongst the lower-middle class Jewish intellectual milieu. And in any case Litvak stressed the fact that they "read everything" that came out in "that language".

Socialism in Hebrew before Peretz

Socialist writing in Hebrew was not a novelty in Peretz's time, and was not invented by him. Peretz had a Hebrew socialist tradition on which to build. Although the contemporary Hebrew literature was less accessible to the average worker, socialist Hebrew literature actually predated socialist writings in Yiddish primarily because the Hebrew literature of the *Haskala* of previous decades dealt heavily with issues of Jewish poverty and suffering.

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[308]See A. Litvak, *"Di "zhargonishe komitetn"*," *Royter Pinkes* (Yiddish) (Warsaw: Kultur lige, 1921), 5-30, 14.

[309]Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 298-302. Miron points out that later, during the last decade of Peretz's life (1905-1915), while creating more content in Yiddish, "Hebrew and Hebrew writing progressively became a burden to the master… most of the Hebrew versions of his stories published during those years were actually based on translations done by others (such as the minor Hebrew novelist Y. Shaf) and slightly edited by the author." (ibid, 298).

At least since the 1870's one can find socialist writings in Hebrew.[310] The Hebrew writer Peretz Smolanskin (1842-1885) gave voice in his acclaimed journal *Ha-shahar* (*The Dawn*) both to the nascent Jewish nationalist thinking and to socialist and radical world views; this journal became the first platform for Peretz's Hebrew poetry,[311] as it had to Y.L. Kantor before him. In 1875, the Hebrew poet Yahalal (Yehuda Halevi Levin, 1844-1925) published in *Ha-shahar* a long poem in four chapters entitled *Kishron ha-ma'ase* ("The Ability to Act"). Each of the poem's chapters was devoted to a different profession, from the poverty stricken autodidactic man ("Poor I was, no food or clothing,\ All my friends did nothing to help…"[312]); to the simple worker ("An artisan I was in craft and factory\ There I worked with no shame\…\ I know I will not starve", 12), who eventually understands he is being exploited ("From dusk till dawn I work hard\ And for a person who didn't work I give my share"), (18); all the way up to the capitalist who lives off of the sweat of others:

> *My hand accumulates – but it does not toil (…)*
> *And tens of thousands work for me,*
> *And I paid them for their work*
> *Only to get enough strength so they won't starve (...)*
> *And only for me all of the profits" (39).*

While each class received "its own voice", the reader can easily interpret who among them has the writer's sympathy versus the ones the writer believes to be morally corrupt. The voice of the capitalist is the voice of utter exploitation. The upper moral hand belongs to the lower

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[310]In Yiddish, one can detect proto-socialist tendencies already in S.Y. Abramovitsh's drama *Di takse* (The Tax; 1869). In it Abramovitsh emphasizes the common denominator of the middle class: the readiness of different representatives to cooperate as long as it is mutually profitable, and the general desire to exploit the poor and powerless (Miron, Dan. 2010. Abramovitsh, Sholem Yankev. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Abramovitsh_Sholem_Yankev (accessed May 24, 2013)).

[311]With poems such as "Li omrim", "Ha-shutafut", "Halukat Ha-khokhmot" from the mid 1870's.

[312]Yehudah Levi Levin, "Kishron Ha-ma'ase," in Ketavim nivḥarim [me-et] Y.H.L.L. (Yehudah Levi Levin) 2 (Hebrew) (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1911), 7.

classes; their rebellion against their employer is morally justified. In a simple and direct way, Yahalal's poem exposes the core of socialist thinking, namely "class war".[313]

The pioneering Hebrew efforts by the journalist and publisher A.S. Lieberman (1843-1880) and the poet and essayist Morris Vintshevski (1856-1932) helped promote socialist world views amongst a particular group of the Jewish traditionalist lower middle class.[314] Lieberman published a socialist periodical in the late 1870's in Hebrew entitled *Ha-emet* (*The Truth*, 3 volumes), in which he authored articles influenced by Karl Marx,[315] and where Yahalal and Vinchevsky also published their work. When asked in 1877 why he chose to write in Hebrew rather in the language of the masses (Yiddish), Liberman admitted that his choice was mainly due to the legal restrictions over the use of Yiddish. The dangerous "zhargon" was suppressed by the Russian authorities in order to further the Jew's linguistic Russification; the authorities forbid any publications in Yiddish regardless of their content.[316]

Vintshevski was a prolific socialist writer in Hebrew and in Yiddish, who authored influential Hebrew feuilletons under the name Ben-Netz. After the authorities in Vienna (and later in Berlin) arrested Lieberman in 1877 for his activism, Vintshevski founded the Hebrew socialist periodical *Asefat khakhamin* (*Sages Assembly*, 8 volumes) where he published his

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[313]See also Einat Baram-Eshel, "Haskala, Socialism, and Nationalism in the Poetry of Yahalal," (Hebrew) in *Poetics and ideology in Modern Hebrew literature: for Menachem Brinker* (Karmel: Jerusalem, 2011), 254-276.

[314]See: Dan Miron, *Bodedim bemoadam* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987), 279-299. On Lieberman and Vintshevski see for example: Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: socialism, nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28-48. Vintchevsky was also of the first Yiddish writers to write about socialism and had an influence on Peretz's socialist Yiddish poetry as well (see fourth chapter).

[315]Feingold, Ben-Ami. 2010. Lieberman, Aharon Shemu'el. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lieberman_Aharon_Shemuel (accessed May 20, 2013).

[316]See Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 43-44; and Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 23.

poems, stories, and essays.[317] Vintshevski was the one who introduced the genre of the prophetic speaker into modern Hebrew poetry with his socialist poem "*Masa duma*" (The Burden of Duma, 1877). In so doing, he gave rise to an array of Hebrew pseudoprophetic poems.[318] Written as a pseudo biblical chapter, his work was divided into biblical-style verses (*psukim*). It used common biblical phrases ("ko amar adonay tsva'ot", "So the Lord Almighty has spoken"), and made God to be its speaker. God has come to speak because "The blood of thee who starved to death has spoken to me from the earth" ("*Dmey khalaley ra'av tsa'aku elay min ha-adama*"); an allusion to the biblical story of murder-amongst-siblings. God warns the kingdoms that "because you degraded the labor, and against the working class you raided as locust" ("*Ekev ki bizitem et ha-avoda, ve-al khel ha-oved pshetatem ka-yelek*"), He would punish them seven times for their sins. "You will not rise above the meager and poor, through the fruit of their labor you have fattened and thickened" ("*lo titnas'u al ani va-rash, mipri yedehem shumantem avitem*").[319]

Socially oriented stories in Hebrew appeared during the 1890's. Among the most notable of these is a short story by Yitskhok Goyda's (a.k.a. B. Gorin) called "The Enlightened Carpenter"(1892). Goyda based his working-class hero protagonist on the figure of the

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[317]Zalman Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Yiddish) (Vilne: B. Kletskin, 1926), 977-978; for a lengthy discussion regarding *Asefat Khakhamin* by Vintshevski himself, see Moris Vintshevski, *Erinerungen* (Yiddish) (Moscow: Shul un bukh, 1926), 32-84, 97-99, 103-106. For a lengthy discussion of early socialist writing in Hebrew, see Yosef Klausner, *Historiiah shel ha-sifrut ha-'ivrit ha-hadashah* 6, (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1950), 126-350.

[318]Dan Miron, *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 18-19. Originally the poem was published in the 8th and last volume of *Asefat khakhamin*.

[319]Reprinted in Morris Vintshevsky, *Gezamelte verk* 9 (New York: Frayhayt, 1927), 318.

socialist activist and Yiddish poet A. Lyessin;[320] the works of Alexander Ziskin Rabinovich (1854-1945),[321] and by others; many of whom published their works through the publisher Ben-Avigdor, who will be discussed further in the chapter. Thus, *The Arrow*, Peretz's 1890's attempt at producing a socialist Hebrew journal did not come out of a void.

Literature in *The Arrow*

Peretz's contribution to socialist Hebrew literature comes in the *bletl*-like format of *The Arrow*, in his use of the accentuated biblical Hebrew-prophet voice which he linked to a socialist rather than a nationalist world-view, and in the modern writing styles he introduced into Hebrew literature such as decadence.

The two "nice revolutionary stories" that Litvak mentions (quoted earlier in the chapter), "The Thought" and "The Violin: An Arab Legend"[322] are allegorical short stories and it is interesting to examine Litvak's claim that they are "revolutionary". "The Thought", which appears to be set in the Middle Ages, tells the tale of a godly daughter who was born out of "the spark from the eyes of the prophet" and who wants to move from the provinces into the big city in order to preach the message of equality and "love to all people". She makes her point in a symbolic language: she tells the narrator to listen to the sigh of the moon, who utters "I am poor, meager, and small". The narrator replies by telling a tale based on Isaiah

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[320]See A. Litvak, "B. Gorin: A bisl erinerungen," (Yiddish) in B. Gorin, *Gezamelte shriften 1* (New York: Elizabeth Gorin, 1927), 18. Gorin also published a short Yiddish story in the very first volume of the *Yontef bletlekh*.

[321]See: Isaac Ben-Mordecai, "Mavo," (Hebrew) [Introduction] to *Nitsane ha-Realizm ha-Siporet ha-'lvrit* |The Buds of Realism in Hebrew Fiction], vol 2 edited by Yosef Even and Yitshak Ben-Mordecai (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1993), 37-42.

[322]I.L. Peretz, "*Ha-machshavah ve-ha-kinor (hagadah 'aravit)*." In Ha-chetz: yalkut sifruti. Ed. I. L. Peretz (Warsaw: Shvartzberg, 1894).

30:26, in which Isaiah (a biblical prophet who appears frequently in Islamic sources) is probably referring to the transformation that will take place in the messianic era. The narrator tells her:

> *According to the legend of the Hebrews, God would fill the light of the moon, and its light would be as the light of the sun.*
> *And the light of the sun? – She asked.*
> *Will grow seven times as much! – I answered.*
> *Then – she sighed quietly – there will be much more light, but what is distorted would not be repaired!*[323]

Carrying this prophetic message of *tikun olam* (repairing of the distorted world) utterly naked, thus representing the sheer naked truth, she encounters outright hostility. The city guards wrap her in a curtain; they block her from the city and physically torture her for insisting on entering it.

The image of her being carried away out of the city, bleeding on a "Sodom bed", is a clear allusion to The Song of Songs[324] and to other tortured martyr-figures. It recalls the image of Jesus on the cross and the Christian saints, but also it alludes to the imprisonment of the Biblical prophet Jeremiah. Both the Biblical prophet and Peretz's heroine strive to avoid bloodshed and both end up in prison.[325]

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[323]Ibid, 19. The passage in Isaiah 30: 26 reads "the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days." In Rabbinic literature this passage was used to prove the claim that the light of the first day of creation was different than the light of the fourth day. Reb Nachman of Bratslav, whose writings influenced Peretz, links the stories of the Torah to the spiritual light of the first day. That light was hidden by God in the stories of the Torah (see Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16-17).

[324]In The Song of Songs 5:7, the female protagonist goes out looking for her beloved, and finds herself wondering in Jerusalem:"The guards found me in the city, hit me and wounded me; striped me of my veil, the city guards."

[325]See more on Peretz's pseudoprophetic poetry in the next chapter.

This “Arab” legend by Peretz was written at a time when proto-Zionist circles were just beginning to colonize Palestine. Ahad-Ha'am, the leader of cultural Zionism, was sending letters from the land which included criticism of the way Palestinians were being treated by the Jewish newcomers.[326] One cannot avoid the thought that Peretz, who also refers frequently to Ahad-Ha'am in his writings,[327] was relating to these currents in public life by writing a story about the prophet who warned against destruction and exile (Jeremiah) and who was imprisoned for doing so. Peretz defamiliarizes the tale and re-tells it from an Arab-Muslim point of view, and in both stories his Arab protagonists quote from Hebrew sources as well as from Arab ones. Its message applies to Jewish politics and contains a warning against the destruction embedded in the colonization-project. Its revolutionary element lies in the way it reveals the clear violent and oppressive character of the authorities. It does so by displaying the contradiction between the authorities and an egalitarian society based on morals.

The second story, "The Violin" tells the tale of a poor man who is granted a miraculous gift: King David's violin. He receives the violin after he tells the prophet Elijah how at night,

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[326]Ahad-Ha'am wrote in 1891:

> *We must be cautious with the way we interact with this foreign people amongst whom we come to live with, to treat them with love and respect, and, needless to say with justice and the rule of law. What do our brothers do in the Land of Israel? The exact opposite! They were slaves in the land of their exile. And suddenly they find themselves living in endless freedom… this sudden change awoke within them a nascent inclination to despotism, as will always be the case with "a slave when he reigneth", and they treat the Arabs with hatred and cruelty, unjustly trespassing into their lands, disgracefully beating them for no good reason, and even bragging about it, and there is no one to step in and stop this disgraceful and dangerous inclination. ("*Emet me-Erets Yisra'el*" (Truth from the Land of Israel), ha-Melits (Sivan 1891)).*

[327]Ze'ev Goldberg, "On Y.-L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism,"(Hebrew) *Khulyot* 7 (2002): 68-71. But it was a one-sided relationship, for Ahad-Ha'am never seriously debated with or referred to Peretz.

animals mocked him outside his home, while the dead rose up from their graves to dance and join the mockery. Elijah then tells the man's troubles to King David in heaven, and the latter decides to grant him the violin out of pity.[328] The music which the poor man elicits from his violin kills those who hear it and he is sentenced by the *qadi* (a Muslim judge) to be committed to a mental institution and to give the violin to the king's wife. Both stories show the inability of the prophetic\heavenly messenger to fulfill their mission, whether they are a person or a musical instrument. Both are received with violence by the authorities, although in the second story, the instrument itself also produces violence.

The contradiction in both stories between the heavenly creative spark and the state's authority is probably the reason why Litvak referred to them as "revolutionary". When he writes that workers enjoyed listening to him retell these stories in Yiddish, he contradicts what the Hebrew literary critic Yosef Klausner wrote about this story. According to Klausner, "even…an educated reader who is familiar with the European style" will have a hard time understanding this story, "and the simple folk won't ever understand it."[329] According to Klausner, Peretz wrote about the oppressed simple folk "not because of his democratism", but rather because "he has a warm and easily impressed heart."[330] Klausner wrote these words

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[328]Here Peretz is using the well known literary motif of the "dance of the dead". He will later put this motif at the center of his 1908 symbolist play "At Night at the Old Marketplace".

[329]Yosef Klausner, "Our Literature,"(Hebrew) *Hashiloach* 7 543.

[330]Klausner continues to explain Peretz's affection towards the poor by inaccurately attributing a background of poverty to his biography: "and because he was raised and educated in poverty, the hunger and want of the Jewish street, he describes the poverty and poor conditions of our simple people with great affection. And he cannot, like any person with a sensitive heart, but stand with the oppressed nor not to rise up against their oppressors." (idem). Klausner even attributes a kind of Hebrew quality to Peretz's Yiddish work, rendering even Peretz's Yiddish as inaccessible to the masses. Klausner acknowledges that "It's true that he wrote most of his stories in the language of the simple folk; but whoever doesn't understand Hebrew will not be able to understand Peretz's Yiddish stories. There are too many idioms and Hebrew expressions, too many descriptions of Hebrew teachers and rabbinic authorities; they are filled with too many allusions to what is written in our ancient literature." (idem)

upon the publication of Peretz's collected Hebrew works.[331] They reflect Klausner's tendency to detach Peretz from his political leanings, and to detach Peretz's work from their political aspects.

Closer to the truth here is Rozentsvayg, who stated that "in *The Arrow* Peretz took as his target all of the patrician-Hebrew sanctities."[332] Peretz's main achievement in *The Arrow* is in successfully combining political and artistic innovations in Hebrew.

According to the contemporary Hamutal Bar-Yosef, in *The Arrow* Peretz published the first modernist manifesto of Hebrew literature.[333] These include the one page modernist manifesto carrying the bombastic title "The Birth of Moses, the Giver of the Torah" in which the motif of a new prophetic message being met with violence by mighty powers re-appears. In this new prophetic message "he suggests to his readers a new literary path as if it meant the redemption of the nation and the world."[334] Writing in a style that evokes Biblical Hebrew, Peretz writes about the new literature that is entering the world:

> *And the heavens dressed royally, beautiful and azure… the sound of angel wings was heard in the wind, and on the wings of the sounds towered the spirit of every bird with wings… and an echo of a new poetry (shira hadasha), coming down to earth from the sky penetrating the hearts of people…*
> *But Egypt's river will become gloomy and out of fear will suddenly spew loam and slime, and the frog will whistle in anger…*
> *And underneath Pharaoh the chair shook and on his head the crown quivered. Then his sages and advisers panicked, and representatives came from the four corners of his kingdom. They were not*

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[331]Ibid, 540-547.

[332]Rozentsvayg, Radikaler peryod, 59.

[333]Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature: Bialik, Berdychevski, Brener* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1997), 19.

[334]Idem.

bringing any good news with them: collapsed, the idols torn, blasts in Thebes, the sun temple about to crumble, and anxiety all around Egypt.
Then Pharaoh became obstinate and he got up from his seat, and he gave an order: all first born throw into the river!
In vain!...[335]

Again the failure of the new prophecy, an early modernist and decadent notion,[336] appears in this text. Peretz's own self-image as the one who desires to "crush your brain", sneaks in into this text in a sophisticated manner and it is hard to imagine it is a coincidence. The original Hebrew which Peretz copies in the phrase "blasts in Thebes", is "*pratsim be-No Amon*."[337] The Hebrew word "*pratsim*" (blasts) can also be read as the plural of the name "Peretz" – '*peretzim*' (or 'Peretzs'). One can argue that Peretz intended this double meaning, which strengthens his image as a fearless radical writer capable of standing up against "the powers that be" with his words.

A polemic article concerning Jewish nationalism that was included in *The Arrow* entitled "The Creators of Chaos" was written by Nahum Sokolow, but signed under the pseudo name Amittai.[338] The article criticizes Zionism, and the inaccurate way in which it was defining Jewish identity.[339] Sokolow saw the (proto) Zionist circles as imitating the German version of "extreme imaginary nationalism of the superiority of race and homeland". And he regards this

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[335]I.L. Peretz, "*Huledet Moshe.*" In *Ha-chetz: yalkut sifruti*.

[336]Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature*.

[337]"*No Amon*" is the way the Egyptian city of Thebes is mentioned in the Bible (see: Nahum 3:8).

[338]In the Bible, it is the name of the father of the prophet Jonah.

[339]See also: Ela Bauer**,** *Between Poles and Jews: The Development of Nahum Sokolow's Political Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 131. For Bauer, Sokolow in this article is mostly repeating his 1870's and 1880's opinions regarding nationalism. Only in 1897, after attending the first Zionist congress in Basel, Sokolow finally "saw the light" and became an ardent Zionist.

nationalism as nothing but a "German statue dressed in a Jewish prayer shawl."[340] To Sokolow, the Zionists were creating a land-based version of Judaism, and for them this land is exclusively The Land of Israel; a footnote is added by the publisher on the first page of the article which reads "The Land of Israel? But it is also the cradle of the Canaanites and the Philistines and the Samaritans!"[341] This article, which was edited by Peretz, serves as a segway to dealing with Peretz's own analysis of the early Zionist circles which he encountered during the 1890's.

"Beating Their Heads Against the Wall": Satirizing the Choveve Zion in Hebrew and in Yiddish

> *"Our national goal is cosmopolitism, and there is reason to fear that when we arrive in the Holy Land we will lose our enlightenment and our free spirit and become fanatics and reactionaries." (Peretz, 1891)*

In 1893, Peretz published an allegorical sketch in Yiddish called *Hekht* (literally, a pike fish, but also figuratively "an important person"), as part of a series of stories entitled "Little Stories for Big People". The story tells of the live pikes and carps that were bought by a Jewish household to prepare for a festive meal. The pikes themselves beat their heads against their glass-wall prison for a long time before they realize the fatal destiny set out for them, which they blame on the corruption of money. They pray against the spell that fell upon

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[340]Amittai, "*Yotsrei tohu*" ("The Creators of Chaos") In *Ha-chetz: yalkut sifruti*. In this article, Sokolow expresses views very similar to those of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) regarding nationalism and Jewish identity. Namely, that modern Jews are not to be considered a distinct ethnic group, but rather that modern Jews are the result of mass conversions to its ranks in certain points in history. For more on the subject see: Shlomo Sand, Ernest Renan, *On the Nation and the "Jewish People"* (London: Verso, 2010). Renan there writes that according to the race-based nationalism that German peoples adhere to, the right of German peoples on a certain piece of land overcomes the right of the inhabitants of this land to determine their fate (ibid, 54).

[341]Amittai, "*Yotsrei tohu*" ("The Creators of Chaos") In *Ha-chetz: yalkut sifruti*.

them, but then they remember that they haven't prayed for a very long time and now they can't remember the words.[342] When they figure that out, they try to come up with an escape plan for themselves and for the carps who had long ago accepted their destiny. Their plan is to jump out of the bowl and "go back home" to the river. They repent as Jews do on Yom Kippur, bemoaning the fact that their own "homeland" is forgotten, "a sin" and "an outrage" they call it. Of course any such plan would be by definition suicidal, and indeed the pikes command the carps to jump out of the water bowl they are both in, commanding them, in fact, to go meet their maker:

> *The pike commands and the carps went out of the bowl onto the floor… and they are lying neither dead nor alive.*
> *I didn't know, says the second pike, that you are such an inspirational speaker; honey is flowing out of your mouth! –*
> *Meanwhile, the carps groan –*
> *Push yourselves! Commands the first pike*
> *The carps jump only a little bit further.*
> *Oy – they groan, – no river is yet to be seen, and our bones are breaking, and we are out of breath…*
> *Push yourselves; pull together your remaining strength! It's not far now, give another jump!*
> *But the carps cannot hear anymore. (Ale Verk, vol2, 290-1)*

What comes to mind, reading these lines about the "pike commanders" is the Yiddish proverb *der hekht shtinkt fun kop* (the pike stinks from its head); meaning the source of the problem lays in the top, in the people in charge. Who is Peretz alluding to as sending its "troops" on suicide missions to go "back home"? Who is telling the people that it is impossible to live where they currently do, and with sweet words urges them to jump towards their freedom in the next world?

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[342]The dialogue here is very funny. When the two (Jewish) pikes fail to know the words of the prayer (the *Ashre*), one of them utters:"Oy, I have an urge to pray – the first one moans loudly – so do I, - admits the second one, but after all we are as you well know nothing but fish!..." (Ale Verk, vol2, 289).

Workers' reading-circles in Vilnius during the mid 1890s asked themselves the same questions. Kalman Marmor, who led such a reading-circle of workers (see chapter 2), tells the story of how he and the workers were all in agreement regarding the meaning of nine of the ten stories (of the series "Little Stories for Big People"), but only in regard to *Hekht* they were in strong disagreement. Marmor writes:

> *The majority interprets it as the war between work and capital. I'm not in agreement with them. I say, that I.L. Peretz means very simply "The Choveve Zion" (meaning "the Zionists"). None from the majority would accept my explanation, because none of them know this particular movement as I do, which I have read about in Hebrew publications.*
> *Unable to agree with the majority, I volunteered to write a letter to Peretz asking him what he had in mind in this particular story. I purchased a double postcard and described how we, a group of readers, were reading his story about the "pikes" and the "carps". My opinion was that he means "Choveve Zion". The others disagree with me. So we ask him to tell us who guessed correctly, and what exactly he, I.L. Peretz, means with this particular story.*
> *We waited a long time for his answer. There were people who made fun of us for expecting that the great writer in Warsaw would answer us with what he meant in one of his texts. But we didn't wait in vain. His answer was:*
> *"Mr. Marmor, you have guessed correctly. I.L. Peretz".*
> *Those few words made a strong impression on us.*[343]

Marmor describes how Peretz satirizes a movement whose name was still mostly unknown outside of narrow circles within the Jewish intelligentsia. In his satire Peretz portrays the Zionist plan as a suicide mission. Masked by a thin layer of traditional language (despite a secular leadership), dealing with dubious funds, and mobilizing agents talented in the art of speech, this movement — ridiculous and disastrous as its goal may seem – might still get its way.

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[343]Marmor, *Mayn lebns geshikhte* (vol 1), 317-318.

Peretz ends the story of our "brave heroes" the pikes, when they debate between themselves, just how many more live offerings will be needed in order to complete their plan:

> *The carps are dying on the floor, and the pikes are debating. Both admit that given a correct jump it is possible to come back to the river. But one of them says, that for this one needs other fish, not vile carps, which can only jump in water, and cannot endure a couple of hours without breathing and eating, that one needs for this – electrical fish!...*
> *And the second one thinks, that actually only carps can do it! But one needs many, many carps! And if 100,000 will jump, one will succeed, and when one will succeed, ha! Ha! (Ale Verk, vol2, 291)*

The willingness to send people to die for a hopeless cause and the desire to breed a new kind of fish, a modern fighting fish, is how Peretz wishes to caricaturize the nascent Zionist movement in 1893. That said, Peretz may have unintentionally advocated poorly for Diaspora Nationalism as well. The reason is that the fish are doomed whether they jump out of the water to die in the air, but are also doomed if they stay in the containers to be slaughtered by the people in the house. We can easily deduct from this allegory a sense of all around despair which it seems was not Peretz's intent. In any case, at least since 1890 Peretz was expressing doubtful and negative views towards the Zionist plan.[344]

In 1895, Peretz published another satirical text in Yiddish regarding Zionism entitled "One Guy Swindles the Other", which was published in his Yontef Bletl volume *Kol Khamiro*. In it

[344]In the memoirs of the Hebrew publisher Ben Avigdor, he mentions quite a few incidents where Peretz would speak passionately against the Choveve Tsiyon and get into heated arguments about this issue (Ben Avigdor himself was an ardent Zionist). For example, once at a Hebrew Passover ball with female Hebrew students in 1891, Peretz was lecturing in Polish "in praise of cosmopolitism and against the Choveve Tsiyon". (Ben Avigdor, "Misefer zikhronotay," *Ha-tzfira* {19\4\1917}, 6). Also in his texts from the 1890's, Peretz started to view the immigration idea as the solution for Jews negatively, be it to Palestine or to Argentina (an idea which was supported by the Baron de Hirsch at that time). One can read it in his opening article "*Vos viln mir*?" ("What do we Want?") in the almanac *Literature and Life* (where *Hekht* was also published). There he writes, "at the time when hard line ideologists and cunning charlatans promised them (the Jewish people) monumental help, a radical means for all its diseases and pains… in a few years a Jewish state would be established in the Land of Israel, or a Jewish republic in Argentina would be founded… the poor wretched people believed, and all other issues were put aside, all of the common-human interests… the crowd packed up in a hurry to go, the old drum of "we are the chosen people" thundered, Zion's cymbal – rumbled' and the old rabbinic bat spread its wings over the confused crowd…"(Ale Verk, vol8, 89; Quoted also in: Goldberg, "On Y.-L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism," 60-61).

the storyteller listens to the troubles of Gavriel, a poor Jew with ten kids who died, four in one week! Gavriel is trying to do the reverse treck from the Land of Israel where he settled back to his home in Eastern Europe in time for Passover. Gavriel does not understand what the Eastern European Zionist propagandists achieve by sending Jews like him to the Holy Land; they don't profit financially out of it like the Turks who take bribes or the Jewish patriots who sold him "a pure rocks & bones piece of land". When three messengers for the Zionist idea came to his hometown, Gavriel looked at them from afar and thought there goes another group of *daytshn* (literally "Germans", figuratively: secular Jews, proponents of the Jewish enlightenment), but to his surprise they acted differently:

> *He kept a distance from them, as a truly pious Jew… and thought such German types are surly and foul mouthed – they eat without washing and make fun of pious Jews.*
> *And how stunned he became as he watched and saw, that these strange German types were very different… they washed… blessed… ate with their heads covered… spoke of the holy Torah and of the Land of Israel.*
> *He thought that this is a comedy; they play him like a fool… they want to deceive him. Though he sees that this is serious, their eyes aflame, their nostrils aflaring, always another one jumps up and gives a whole sermon, that the Land of Israel is eternal, the Torah is eternal and Israel is also eternal – and politely interweaves all of it – at least start kissing the binding of Torah!*[345]

And eventually it did the trick; Gavriel has opened up to them. Peretz was mocking here what he saw as a great weakness of Zionists, which was their pact and co-operation with religious leaders. How seemingly modern people cynically adapt pious language and customs in order to advance their political goals.[346] Gavriel's fear of the rumors that Jews are being beat up there hold him off a bit from the plan, but when he was reminded of the fact that that poor

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[345]Y.L. Perets, "*Eyns dos andere opgenart*," *Kol Khamiro* (April 1895). Reprinted in: Rosentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 165.

[346]Something that Peretz and secular Yidishists have also done using Hasidic language and motives. For more on the subject see chapter 5.

Jews were being persecuted in Eastern Europe, it re-ignites him to go on with his plan to move to the Land of Israel. Although later he understands he was fooled to believe that there are no pogroms in the Land of Israel – there the Turks beat you up "Look what they did to Armenians," he says.

The storyteller reads a hilarious mock-version of a romantic Choveve Zion poem to Gavriel. Told through the voice of a non-Jewish Russian, the words of the poem boil down to "Jews out!". The Russian word "*prakhvost*!" ("bloody swine"; the stanzas are rich with Russian vocabulary) that is used to describe Jews in the poem, frightens Gavriel very much and he wishes he will never have to hear this word again. One stanza in the poem reads:

> *"You want to assimilate? Oh! I forgot-*
> *You want to help me put on a uniform-*
> *I don't need a partner to eat a pig*
> *And a kamarinsky-dance I can dance without you!"*[347]

The source of Zionism, Peretz writes in this satire, is a narrow circle of wealthy assimilated Jews who, wishing to further assimilate in their European host countries, plot to send away as many poor Jews as they can in order to advance their own aims. All the others, including the messengers, are ones who read fantastical letters describing a rosy view of life in Palestine. Even Gavriel sent letters back home telling his wife only good news from the Land of Israel so as not to upset her. But the letters are read by more than just his wife, thus inspiring others to immigrate to the land too. This is how the Zionist business-network operates:

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[347]Rosentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 167. A "*kamarinsky* dance" is a kind of a traditional Russian folk dance. Peretz also mocks here some of his own Hebrew poetry from the previous decade (the 1880's), some of which had clear proto-Zionist tendencies. For example, in the long poem *Manginot Ha-zman* ("The Melodies of Our Age"), he wrote lines such as:"This is your consolation! Oh, the lips\ That a hero's poem, a song of redemption they sang\ When the Jordan river backed away and as a wall stood the water,\ Or songs of Zion, glorified in holy –" (See: *Kol Kitvey Perets*, vol. IX, second part [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1957], Taf"pey-bet).

Everybody fooled himself; and it cost us so much blood and money, because for a long time no one had the strength to admit that people fooled themselves…
And today?
Some still fool themselves… many love to fool themselves… many are already too far stuck in it….[348]

Surprisingly, Peretz published not only works that mocked Choveve Tsiyon but also works that praised the proto-Zionist group. In fact, Peretz may have been even active in establishing a chapter of the Choveve Zion movement in Zamość, before he settled in Warsaw. One bit of textual evidence to this fact can be found in his pamphlet in Hebrew "*Even ve-even, eyfa ve-eyfa*" ("Stone and Stone, Double Standards")[349] in which he describes how he goes around between rich Jews asking for contributions. He requested a contribution from one Dr. Gentis for this new Choveve Zion chapter. Here is Gentis's response and the exchange which followed:

"- You as well – he wondered – dwelling in dreams, and your heart was taken by enchanting deceit? What will you do with this money? Isn't it time to forget all this nonsense?...
- Why? – I asked – in wonder!
- Are we a People?
- Do we not have a unique belief system!?...
- Superstition, fanaticism.
- A unique education system!
- An education system of big and small melamdim (traditional teachers).
- A unique literature!
- Of Beit Midrash dwellers!
A history… -
But talking didn't help, the Doctor turned his shoulder and went into the other room, and I remained with my question."[350]

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[348]Rosentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 169.

[349]*Hatzfira* 237, Nov 1890: p. 2.

[350]Idem.

It is clear from this passage that although Peretz is playing the part of the Choveve Tsiyon advocate, he is not fully convinced of their arguments himself. In his arguments in this exchange, he does not defend the idea of settling in the Land of Israel specifically but rather the general idea of nationalism. However, the Zionist model of nationalism, would later conflict with his conviction of a diasporic version of nationalism.[351]

In 1892, merely a year before the publication of the satire *Hekht* in Yiddish, Peretz published the text *Manginat Ha-zman* ("The Melody of Our Age")[352] in Hebrew, a text which is considered to be "a piece of propaganda in favor of the idea of Choveve Zion."[353] *Manginat ha-zman* is also a short allegorical sketch which consists of a dialogue between Miriam the clavichord player and David the poet. Its content is the exact opposite of Peretz's Yiddish satires from the same time. In this story, the longing for the Holy Land is as real as can be, and forgetting Zion is equated with the most severe sin.

The couple in the story is experiencing a relationship crisis, since David is not able to listen to Miriam's melodies and thus he upsets her. A "new wind" has captured him, he says, a wind that was born not in this world. "What happened to me?" he asks and explains, "Through the window of our temple I observed life …of our people and saw… its troubles!" "Yes! Forgive me, David! She called and fell into his arms."[354] The couple discusses whether this new nationalist sentiment that they discovered and the capacity for "feeling the pain and the

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[351]See: Goldberg, "On Y.L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism," 57-58; and see also "Peretz's Brand of Nationalism" in the Introduction.

[352]Y.L. Perets, *Ha-ilemet, Manginat ha-zman* (Warsaw: Ben Avigdor, 1892).

[353]Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 294. It was published in Ben Avigdor's Penny Library series, which will be discussed further in this chapter.

[354]Y.L. Peretz, *Manginat ha-zman* (Warsaw: Ben Avigdor, 1892), 28-29.

sorrow of their people" can be expressed through music. David challenges Miriam to express social agony through her music:

> *"Make an effort," he answered in a bitter voice. "Play for me [the sounds of]: stress, hunger, thirst, contempt and disgrace, humiliation, subjugation. Play a heartfull of ashes, a brain full of decay, a hand and a foot atrophying from lack of work –"*[355]

The desire to give voice to human misery through art, a theme that Peretz himself was struggling with at least since his *Bilder fun a provints rayze*, takes on a particular outlook in this story. The melody that Miriam ultimately manages to produce expresses "a sea of tears" and it reminds David of Yom Kippur and of the Wailing Wall. The melody eventually becomes hopeful:

> *Melody of peasant, a melody full of an innocent's worry, a hope for justice and the faith of an honest heart… as if from the fog burst sparks of light… sparks of hope as if seen from afar by a traveler – but suddenly she stopped playing, exhausted, and many kisses covered her check - -.*[356]

This story is infused with a messianic mood, pseudo-traditionalism, and a back to-the-earth feel, a call back to the Holy Land, with all its potential for sexual and national revival. These are all ideals that the radical Peretz came out against during the last decade, and which are presented here as the solution for the social suffering of Jews in Eastern Europe. Whereas in some of Peretz's stories from the 1890's (especially in his Yiddish work such as "*Bontshe Shvayg*"), the portrayal of human suffering is accompanied by a clear call for social revolt; here the solution tends to be more romantic. In this sense, the text is quite typical of the sentimental proto-Zionist poetry that dominated Hebrew texts of the 1880's.

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[355]Peretz, *Manginat ha-zman*, 30.

[356]Ibid, 30-31.

The *Hibbat Ziyyon* poetry was meant to stir an intense level of emotion amongst its readers for the sake of Zion. It expresses yearning for the land while bemoaning the poor state of Jews in exile. One of its most famous examples is the poem "*Tikavatenu*" ("Our Hope"), written by 22 year old Naphtali Herz Imber (1856-1909). The first two of its original nine stanzas were later reworked and became the national anthem of the state of Israel. Its seventh and eighth stanzas go as follows:

> *As long as pure tears there*
> *From the eyes of my people are shed*
> *To cry at night for Zion*
> *Awake every midnight*
>
> *As long as the feeling of love for the nation*
> *Beats in the heart of the Jew*
> *We could still hope today*
> *That the God of wrath would pity us.*[357]

This combination of Zion and tears was abundant in the writing of Hebrew poets during the 1880's. But it is not what we have come to expect from Peretz the radical and the sensual Hebrew poet. Possibly, Peretz wrote *Manginat ha-zman*, which was published in 1892, just before he began to feel the influence of social radicalism. It is also possible that this text was in fact written as far back as the early 1880s.

But still, how does one explain this inconsistency? Did Peretz present one stance in Hebrew and a different, more progressive one, in Yiddish?

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[357]See in N.H. Imber's Collected Poetry, edited by Dov Sadan (1950). Ruth Carton-Blum's anthology of proto-Zionist Hebrew poetry is a good place to start. See: Ruth Carton-Blum, *Ha-Shirah ha-'hrit bi-Tekufat Hibbat Ziyyon* (Jerusalem, 1969). For more on Peretz's place in Hebrew poetry, see next chapter.

The choice of language is not necessarily significant in regard to the different voices of Peretz, as indicated by the existence of his radical Hebrew book *The Arrow*, but it certainly plays a role. In a pamphlet in Yiddish, published in October 1894 entitled "What Should I Want?" ("*Vos zol ikh veln*?" in the Sukkoth edition of the Yontef bletlekh, *Hoshayne*), Peretz explains some of his inconsistencies. In this text, he expresses negative views about the path the Zionist movement was taking, contrasting his feelings about the current movement with the affection for the movement he felt in the past:

> *I once had a beloved.*
> *I loved her even though she was poor and bare… I loved her, because I am, as I have said more than once, a hopeless romantic and an idealist in the "realist period"![358] And she seemed so pretty to me, such an ideal-beauty, so sublime, so noble, and so good… for a period of time she was my muse, and then from the strings of my harp came the softest, sweetest, most sublime tones – because I sang praise to her out of my whole, tender heart!*
> *I had good nights and sweet dreams then, because she stood by my bed night after night.(…)*
> *With time my beloved became corrupt! (…) Now she befriends Rabbis, Melamdim and Yeshiva-students, and goes from house to house with a charity-box, collecting coins for the dowries of orphaned girls. (…) With time she became contaminated, neglected and abandoned…*
> *I don't want to keep her name secret… The lady is called "Choveve Zion"And when I see her, my heart dies of pity, and my gallbladder pours out the bitterness of anger… and I can't help it… I don't even have the slightest hope! My burning desire is that the master of the universe would purify her, make her fresh again, healthy and young, tear her out of the hands of the dark forces and give her back her noble, happy, healthy charm…(Ale verk, vol 8, 76-78)*

The socialist Litvak wrote in his memoir about this article, regarding it as very radical in its time.[359] But this text by Peretz does not yet represent an anti-Zionist perspective. His words are those which a liberal-Zionist could feel comfortable with, for it does not undermine the core Zionist ideology. Instead, Peretz wants to restore the Zionist practice to "the right track".

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[358]Peretz is alluding here to the new movement in Hebrew literature, The New Wave, which promoted a realistic and naturalistic esthetic.

[359]Litvak, *Vos geven*, 81.

In this case, that means breaking the alliance with the religious establishment. Peretz here is giving voice to the ideological divide within the Choveve Tsiyon movement which led to a substantial weakening of the movement in the late 1880s and early 1890s. The movement managed to attract major rabbinical figures to its ranks, but the question of whether or not to follow Jewish religious law, and the kind of rationale (more traditional-religious or more secular-nationalist) given to the colonization process, created an ideological split within the movement.[360] In this article, Peretz is expressing a disappointment that puts him on the fence, but still closer to the secular end of the Choveve Tsiyon movement. In another critique of the same year, he writes: "With one word everything was done, so the rabbis would say: "Bom!" so the Choveve Zion would have "Bim-Bom"! And the sheep would shear themselves without bleating…"[361]

In his essays, Peretz often referred to the proto-Zionist movement during the 1890's. His attacks became spikier and more direct as he grew closer to circles of Jewish socialists during the 1890's as can be seen for example in the satire *Hekht* .[362] His Yiddish feuilleton "The Argument"[363] from the same period portrays two young people conversing in Yiddish in a public park in Warsaw. One explains to the other his relationship towards the Zionist idea. In the conversation, Peretz puts forth a profound critique of Zionist ideology, suggesting that Zionism is still fully embedded in the traditional-religious world and receives from it its

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[360]Stanislawski, Michael. 2010. Ḥibat Tsiyon. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hibat_Tsiyon (accessed September 19, 2012).

[361]It is taken from the Yiddish feuilleton *Literatur un lebn*, published in the almanac with the same name. The text is signed with one of Peretz's pen names: The clown from the editorial office (*Lets fun redaktsye*), see *Literatur un lebn*, 1894, 195-196. Or Ale Verk, vol 7, 93.

[362]See also: Goldberg, "*On Y.-L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism*," 58-65.

[363]"*Der vikuekh*," Ale verk, vol 8, 127-132.

conceptual vocabulary. Peretz avoids an outright attack and is careful not to mock Zionism. However, through this text, he suggests that modern, enlightened people should consider Zionism infantile and romantic. The speaker, who reminisces about his childhood years, defines himself as "not a Zionist", but declines to call himself an "anti-Zionist". He explains his past attraction to the movement and this is how their conversation begins:

> *Nu, so you're still not a Zionist?*
> *No.*
> *Anti?*
> *God forbid, why anti? Afraid of the "Gazeta Polska"?*[364]
> *So, what then?*
> *What do I know?*
> *Which means?*
> *There… I used to pray seriously once… and praying is –all "Jerusalem and Jerusalem! The Land of Israel and the Land of Israel"!*
> *But I don't know whether Jerusalem and the Land of Israel were not forgotten because people were praying so much; or were people praying all the time because they could not forget Jerusalem and the Land of Israel? (Ale verk, vol 8, 127)*

Jewish religious indoctrination includes daily chanting of a series of texts, in which the words "Jerusalem" and the "Land of Israel" constantly appear. They do not appear there as strict geographical locations, but can be considered metaphorical and spiritual. But when a modern political movement with the name that evokes the traditional "Love of Zion" starts to see these terms as concrete real-estate prospects, how can the same adult who sang as a child about "the land of milk and honey" not get excited by it? Traditional Jewish education embodies a split spatial consciousness, "a half a soul here, and a half there (in the Land of

[364]A liberal Polish newspaper, which was purchased in 1859 by Leopold Kronenberg (1812-1878), a Polish banker and industrialist of Jewish descent. He purchased the paper Gazeta Codzienna, and renamed it two years later Gazeta Polska, with the thought of using it to combat Anti-Semitism. Kronenberg used media outlets he owned in order to spread a pro-Jewish assimilationist message (Żebrowski, Rafał. 2010. Kronenberg Family. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kronenberg_Family (accessed September 20, 2012).

Israel)…"(Ibid, 131). This text seems to be an honest attempt at analyzing the roots of attraction towards Zionism in the Jewish street, including being envious in the national power of other nations (the narrator reminisces how as a kid, seeing an army march, he used to think with tears in his eyes:"where is my military, my music?"(ibid, 128); in his fantasies he was a soldier in the Land of Israel, guarding the Jewish holy sites).

At the end of "The Argument", a poor man appears. He is a former colonist from the Land of Israel, who did not digest the milk and honey well, and he serves as a harsh testament that Zionism is fundamentally a failing project.

In Peretz's non-literary writings of the period about these issues one can find recurrent accusations that Zionist institutions waste money on fantasies instead of investing in the all too real mass of people living and suffering in Eastern Europe. This point is stated in many of his articles of the period. For example, the Hebrew phrase "to throw the fortunes of the Jewish people down the drain" ("*Lehorid mamon yisrael letimyon*") in relation to the actions of the Choveve Tsiyon movement, is repeated several times in a Hebrew review article in *The Arrow* of a pro-Zionist Hebrew almanac called *Ha-pardes* (edited by Ahad Ha-am).[365] In another Yiddish article ("*In eyrope un bay undz hintern oyvn*"), Peretz equates the Choveve Tsiyon movement's practice of selling lands in Palestine to lower-class Jews in Eastern Europe with practices in *Khelm,* the Jewish town of fools. The news from the Land describes a beautiful grove growing on the plot – in which 100,000 francs were invested – and such

[365]Peretz "Book Review: *Ha-pardes*" (Hebrew), in: *Ha-chetz*, 41-49.

gardens are portrayed as the only way to achieve redemption. But when someone inspects the plot, he sees it is nothing but "rocks and bones!" (*shteyner un beyner*!").[366]

Although neither Peretz nor Ahad-Ha'am believed in mass migration of Jews to Palestine, Peretz harshly disagreed with the latter‘s idea of creating a spiritual center for Jews in Palestine – an idea that seemed absurd to Peretz. Peretz addresses Ravnitsky, a publisher and supporter of Ahad-Ha'am’s idea of "spiritual center":

Has Mr. Ravinitsky been foolish enough to believe that an artificial spiritual center far from the life center of the people is possible? Is it possible to have the spark? – namely the people – in one place, and the flame – namely the education of the people – in a different place? And if he hasn't become foolish, than he is kicking up dust in order to blind the eyes of the people![367]

Peretz's belief in Eastern Europe being the center of the Jewish people – where the Jewish intelligentsia should overwhelmingly focus its educational efforts – is perhaps the strongest and most serious reason for Peretz's lack of support for the Zionist plan since the 1890's. An opinion Peretz expressed even years later in an undated letter (from around 1906/7) to the Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), calling him to "go out to the people", leave Ahad-Ha'am's small house of elitist learning, and write in Yiddish.[368] But other reasons played a part as well. As indicated earlier, the Zionists' co-operation with religious factions

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[366]Ale verk, vol8, 84-85. Originally published in the Yontef bletlekh Hanukah volume: *Dos khaneke-likhtl*, 1894.

[367]Peretz, "Book review: *Ha-pardes*," (Hebrew) in: *Ha-chetz*, 45. Also quoted in: Goldberg, "On Y.-L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism," 69.

[368]See Kol kitvey Y.L. Peretz, Vol. X, p. 252; also quoted in Dan Miron, "Literature as a vehicle for national renaissance: The model of Peretz versus that of Bialik," in: *The Enduring Legacy of Y.L. Peretz: A Literary and Cultural Symposium*, 2005, edited by Benny Kraut, 34.

bothered Peretz immensely. He describes the Zionists as bowing down to Rabbis and turning against the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment.[369] Ahad-Ha'am addressed this topic as well at the period, and giving Ahad-Ha'am's centrality in this debate at the time and giving his significance to Peretz, who in Miron words "had always rubbed Peretz the wrong way",[370] Ahad-Ha'am's position should be further examined in order to better understand Peretz's stand.

Ahad-Ha'am was supportive of co-operation of non-religious Zionists with the Jewish religious establishment, as the long as both sides would be tolerant towards the opinions of the other (something he thinks is lacking in the religious camp). For both sides, the secular nationalists and the religious nationalists are seeking the well being of the Jewish People, each according to its own way. Ahad-Ha'am writes he does not believe in the abolition of religion, nor in "fixing religion" (a *tikun*, something that the maskilim preached for), but rather in the "natural development" of religion. Meaning, the belief that the changed material conditions of the Jewish People as a result of the realization of the Zionist plan ("to revive the heart and to prepare it for general development" in Ahad-Ha'am's words) – would eventually lead to developments in religious matters; while staying away from any opposition to present day forms of religion.[371]

Peretz indeed expressed objection of co-operating with the religious establishment, but he surly addressed religious Jews in his writing through his usage of a language and motifs that

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[369]See for example: ibid, 46-47.

[370]Miron, "Literature as a Vehicle for National Renaissance: The Model of Peretz Versus that of Bialik," 34.

[371]See Ahad Ha'am, "*Divrei shalom*," in *Kol kitvei Ahad Ha'am* (Tel Aviv: 1947), 59-60; appeared in *Ha-Melitz* 34, no. 228-229 (1894).

is taken from the religious world. Ahad-Ha'am's position is in favor of the Zionist project to work, thus tolerance between its different fractions is key. Peretz's stated opposition to Zionism on this basis, should be taken with a grain of salt, for he expressed more serious and more fundamental critique of in his writings (far for the heart of the people, wasteful, and suicidal).

The most colorful anti-Zionist text by Peretz is the satirical feuilleton *Literature and Life* (1894). In it, the Choveve Zion movement is depicted as a multi-headed dragon on its way to take control of the Jewish people, using wisely its physical capacities in order to spread its often contradictory messages:

> *A dragon is a legendary monster, or a kind of poisonous snake, with or without wings, but with a few dozen heads… every head has its own separate mouth, its own separate poison and its own separate advantage: if beheaded, it grows straight back! Defeating such a dragon could be done only by cutting off all of its heads at once! Such a dragon is the Choveve Zion, and not because, God forbid, they are lovers of Zion, but because they are a society! As a society they have thousands of heads, the heads are scattered and dispersed on the four corners of the earth… where could you find a cutting-knife for such a beast?*
>
> *(…)*
>
> *And if there is a difference between a dragon and Choveve Zion, it lies only in that the dragon had only one belly, one belly for all of its heads and thus he needed less, while in a human society every head has its own separate belly; every head must separately bite, eating at his own separate expense, and therefore – every society is so expensive! (…)*
>
> *I will risk my life and stand up against the biggest animal and beast (…), but with a dragon, forgive me, I can't sustain a war! Because a dragon with a few dozen heads, one cannot catch in a lie! (…) Thirty five heads are shouting: run, fly, snatch, flee to Palestine… milk and honey flows there for you, the Turk is waiting with open arms, the Arab is dying for you!... And when a few hundred up to a thousand interested persons hear and are passing away in their need, becoming blind from bad water, haggard by hunger, sucked dry by bribery; when women are being whipped all over with bamboo sticks – on their naked breasts, and girls who were seduced are growing of nationalist patriots like mushrooms – the thirty sixth head rises and preaches: we said right away: don't run! An explicit verse: sit still and rest shall ye be saved![372] A impetuous people, God forbid!...*[373]

[372]Isaiah 30: 15.

Following the same model of the contradictory messages coming out of the dragon heads, the Choveve Zion are accused of having double standards in their relation with the Jewish religious establishment (they need to choose whether they wish to be pious or modern progressive people). They are criticized for their dual relation to their Europeanism (on the one hand, writes Peretz in the same article, they say they want "their own culture", but on the other hand, they are European all the way in their conduct). And they are condemned for their co-operation and mixture of Orthodox and modern "university" Jews. All of the above makes the movement indistinct and "multi-headed" in its character. Peretz tells his readers that contrary to the argument that the dragon is a made up story, the Choveve Zion movement is as real as you can get. But there is no difference between the two, in the sense that both are entirely false and therefore both can hurt only those who believe in them.

Peretz uses such spiky rhetoric and colorful imagery to advance his cultural-political wars,[374] and to roundly reject both the ideology and the practices of the Choveve Zion movement.[375] He also mocked the movement‘s appropriation of progressive-socialist jargon for their project.[376] For example, he writes that in Europe, when an industrialist thinks about the question of the workers, "his hands and feet are shaking" – he knows that the workers claiming their rights will become expensive for him since the worker just might come to the

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[373]*Literatur un lebn*, 1894, 197-200. Or Ale Verk, vol 7, 94-96. See also: Goldberg, "On Y.L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism," 62-64.

[374]On the cultural battle in this feuilleton, see next segment of this chapter.

[375]Even on a personal level, Peretz’s personal secretary, Meir Jacob Fried (see N297 in this chapter) claims that although he and Peretz were very close, he was unable able to visit Peretz for many years because Peretz disliked Fried's Zionist activities (Fried, *Yamim ve-shanim*. Vol. 2, 80). However, we also know that some of Peretz's best friends were Zionists, notably the Hebrew poet Bialik (See: Miron, "Literature as a vehicle for national renaissance: The model of Peretz versus that of Bialik," 30-48).

[376]See his article: "*In eyrope un bay undz hintern oyvn*," Ale verk, vol8, 82-84 (see also in this chapter).

“dreadful” understanding that "the industrialists are competing at his expense, and that three quarters of the merchandise comes from his blood and sweat…"[377]). But in the Jewish street such a social struggle manifests itself in "supporting the workers in the Land of Israel…"

In the Hebrew press such as the Zionist daily *Ha-melitz*, Peretz notes that sending charity to workers in Palestine has become a tool of self-promotion for those who want to have their name in the papers and a source of income for the paper that sells the advertisement space for such ads. Peretz concludes that this behavior cannot be called socialism since it does not contain any element of class-war. On the other hand, in the Eastern-European Jewish Diaspora "there are many poor craftsmen. For that same money you could have built them workshops and bought them new machines…"[378]

As expected, Peretz was vehemently attacked in the Zionist press for expressing such views. The criticism included booklets parodying his work, and at the time he polemicized with his attackers with full rhetorical force. Posthumously, even a hundred years after these articles were written, the attacks on Peretz for his stance towards Zionism continued. Although also

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[377]Ibid, 83.

[378]Ibid, 84. It is interesting that in an article he published in 1902 (after the establishment of political Zionism in 1897, and supposedly after Perertz's radical period) in the Yiddish Zionist journal *Der yud* (Ale verk, vol8, 442-451) Peretz defends rather than attacks the class position taken by the Zionist movement. He writes: "Zionism, as a national- rather than a class-movement, as a political and not as an economic party, unites and works for the whole people. The Jewish people's question and the general workers’ question do not oppose one another and don't correspond. One question can be solved without the other. Furthermore – the workers’ question can be solved, and the Jews can find themselves in an even worse situation, if to fix labor – the highest workers’ request – would be added: except the Jews! Thus initially the Jewish-question is a life-question! {…} Would anybody demand of the Irish, who struggle for their political life against England, or the Armenians, who have the same national-political dealings with Turkey, that they should once and for all declare for or against Marx?" (ibid, 446-447). There are many problematic points in this passage – the so called division between a political party and an economic party is a major one; but mostly it shows how Peretz, never became a Zionist, despite showing clear sympathy towards the Jewish-nationalist stance. In the Labor movement, conversely, he fears a dangerous outcome for Jews, a view which he would have been less likely to express during the previous decade.

other prominent Hebrew writers were also very critical towards Zionism,[379] they never received the same backlash that Peretz and Peretz's legacy endured.

The Audacity to Demand Realism: Peretz and the New Wave of Hebrew Literature

> The hard labor with the Bible and ten dictionaries in hand, is one working only for one's tiny honor? And for the single drop of Ambrosia, for "the wise man the writer"[380] in his lifetime, and a little black frame in "Ha-tzfira" or in "Ha-melitz"[381] may they live to a hundred and twenty years, people have still the audacity to demand – besides time, ink, pen and paper still – realism![382]

In 1903, Peretz published a short satirical text in Hebrew mocking three famous figures in the world of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish publishing. There Peretz depicted his longtime collaborator from the *Bletlekh* days, Mordkhe Spektor, and also the figure of Ben-Avigdor (the pen name of Avraham Leyb Shalkovitz, 1866-1921). He starts with an attack on Ben-Avigdor:

> *And one beggar was an odd sod…*
> *He was born half a slave and half a free man…*

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[379]Such prominent writers starting from the greatest Hebrew Haskalah poet Yalag (See 2nd and 4th chapters), who warned already in 1870 (in his article "*Bine le-to'ey ruakh*"), that if ever there would be a Jewish state, than the rabbinic establishment would take it over, and the state would become a fascist and a religious state (See Yehuda Friedlander, "The Struggle of Y.L. Gordon against Lithuanian Rabbis," (Hebrew) in *Studies in East European Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Professor Shmuel Werses* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2002), 285-314). A critical stand towards Zionism can also be found in the Hebrew prose of S.Y. Abramovitch from the 1880's in such stories as "In the Days of Commotion" and "Shem and Yefet in the Wagon" (as discussed in chapter two).

[380]Peretz is probably referring to the Hebrew writer and publisher Ben-Avigdor, whose pamphlet-story "Menahem the Writer" came out in 1893, a year before Peretz's text came out.

[381]Both were leading Hebrew dailies at the time in Eastern Europe. Obituaries were outlined in a black frame.

[382]Peretz, *Literatur un lebn*, 184. Or: Ale Verk, vol 7, 84.

And he became half a writer and half a business man, meaning: a beggar business man, according to rumors he didn't have much…
He went and wrote little tiny books, and he distributed them widely…
And with his load of little books he traveled to where Jews live, and called out: "buy, for the sake of Zion, for the sake of he who resides in Zion!"
…
And they took the books…[383]

In this text, Peretz mocks a figure who stood at the center of the Hebrew publishing world in Warsaw for over two decades and helped it become the world's largest Jewish publishing center by the end of the 19th century.[384] In his early days, Ben-Avigdor devoted his time to writing, as much as he did to publishing, helping to modernize Hebrew literature by introducing realist and naturalistic trends into it. The goal of Ben-Avigdor and his movement which we now refer to as the "New Wave" (*ha-mahalach he-chadash*, after the German *Die Neu Kurse*), was to emulate the success of Yiddish literature and try to bestow on Hebrew the same *folk* credentials that characterized modern Yiddish literature. They did so by focusing almost exclusively on narratives set in the present day,[385] challenging the accepted norm of producing Hebrew literature that was set in the mythical past, which was not always historically accurate. In so doing, the New Wave openly confronted the harsh socio-economic reality experienced by lower class Jews.

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[383]"Ma'ase be-gimel Kabtsanim" [A Tale of Three Beggars], *Hatsofe* 47. March, 1903. Peretz borrows the model from Rabbi Nachman's story "A Tale of Seven Beggars ". In this satire Peretz was trying to please the publisher of *Ha-tsofe* (in which Peretz had a column), Eliezer Eliahu Friedman. Friedman had a financial dispute with Ben-Avigdor. See: A.R. Malakhi, "Y.L. Perets in Ha-tsofe," *Yivo Bleter* 36 (1952): 75.

[384]Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 49-50.

[385]There are always exceptions of course, like Ben-Avigdor's historical Hebrew novel "Four Hundred Years Ago, or a Brother and a Sister at a Time of Need" (1892).

In the Eastern European Jewish context, many in the Jewish Labor movement believed that they were incapable of mobilizing people and creating a mass movement for social change using Hebrew. With spoken Modern Hebrew in its very infancy, any contemporary manifesto for the people would have to be issued in Yiddish. Ben-Avigdor's new realist movement in Hebrew literature was meant to challenge the association of Hebrew with the privileged and learned classes.

Linguistically, the movement employed a more secular Hebrew language and avoided the customary references to traditional Jewish texts, which had been the norm in modern Hebrew literature. Their texts included many Hebrew expressions that were directly translated from Yiddish, representing an intensification of the trend started by S.Y. Abramovitsh in the 1880's. Most of the dialogues clearly reflected speech translated directly from Yiddish. For example, the Yiddish curse "*tsen mises meshunes af im*" ("may he die ten violent deaths") becomes in Hebrew "*eser mitot meshunut alav*"; or the Yiddish expression "*vey mir un vey tsu mayn mazl*" ("woe is me and woe is to my luck") becomes in Hebrew "*oy li ve-oy le-mazali*".[386] The end result is that the language of the New Wave is a non-Biblical, Yiddishized version of Hebrew. Their non-referential style distinguished them from past and contemporary writers.

Rejecting referential language surely meant a rejection of the style of Haskalah literature. But it also meant embracing a style different than of the Hebrew prose of Abramovitsh (despite the shared "Yiddish influence"), whom Bialik referred to as "*Yotser ha-nusaḥ*" (the inventor

[386]For several more examples of the numerous of direct translations (creating many calques) from Yiddish in the Hebrew prose of the New Wave, see: Menuha Gilboa, *The Hebrew New Wave and Outside of it* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1991), 20-21, 29 N41. On the strong influence of Yiddish on spoken Modern Hebrew, see: Ghil'ad Zuckermann, *Israelit safa yafa* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008).

of The Style)[387]. Abramovitsh's innovative style, strove to blend various historical layers of the Hebrew language – including Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, and Talmudic Aramaic (some of which was sourced from the Hebrew-Aramaic component in Yiddish). – This blended Hebrew became the norm for European- pre-Israeli Hebrew fiction.[388]

The "Odessaians", Bialik and Abramovitsh, believed that an intense usage of Aramaic vocabulary in Hebrew prose would somehow compensate for Hebrew's lack of folksiness with respect to Yiddish. But as Frieden shows, more often than not Abramovitsh failed, and his Aramaic often "heightened" rather than "lowered" his Hebrew prose style; because their Aramaic was understood only by the elite circles who were educated in Ashkenazi Yeshivas (as were Bialik and Abramovitsh themselves).[389]

Frieden focuses on Abramovitsh's Hebrew novels from the first decade of the 20th century, meaning a decade after the appearance of the New Wave. A look at the language style of one of Abramovitsh's earlier texts, such as "**Shem** and Japheth on the Train" ("***Shem ve-Yefet*** *ba-'agala*," **1890**),[390] shows an extensive usage of Aramaic vocabulary mainly from Yiddish (like *milse-debdikhuse*, a joke, p. 50). But he does use whole biblical phrases (like his playful use of "*pri bitni khatat nafshi*", "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul", p. 52; Micah 6:7; or "*hadar hacarmel ve-hasharon ma'ase elohenu*" "the splendor of the Carmel and the

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[387]Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik, "*Yotser ha-nusaḥ*," in *Kol kitve Ḥ. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1938), 240–241.

[388]Miron, Dan. "Abramovitsh, Sholem Yankev." YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe 19 August 2010. 9 January 2014 http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Abramovitsh_Sholem_Yankev .

[389]See Ken Frieden, "Nusah Mendele' be-mabat bikorti" [A Critical Perspective on "Mendele's Nusah"], *Dappim le-mehkar be-sifrut* [Research on Literature, Haifa] 14-15 (2006): 89-103. Abramovitsh Hebrew re-working's from Yiddish was in the case of *Fishke der krumer* (Friedn's focus) influenced by Bialik's own Hebrew translation of his work, which tended to heighten the original folky Yiddish original.

[390]See discussion in first chapter.

Sharon created by our God", p. 46; Isaiah 35:2), or from the commentaries (like "*nigzar terudin*", "sentenced to deportation", p. 56; Midrash Genesis Rabba:2), and other "fixed" expressions from traditional sources. Thus, even though Abramovitsh was also considered at his time to be a "realist", and was praised for it by Sholem Aleichem, his language-style was different than Ben-Avigdor's, for it was still to a degree referential.

The New Wave repackaged Hebrew literature in an affordable format embodied by Ben-Avigdor‘s "*Sifre agora*" ("penny books") project (1891-1894): a series of low cost pocket books (5 kopeks a volume), a phenomenon that was just beginning even in European publishing at the time.[391] In 1891, Ben-Avigdor issued a manifest "To the Lovers of Hebrew and its Literature", stating:

> *A great void is felt in our Hebrew literature, it is: the lack of belletristic… no literature for the common people… a literature, where we will see the life of our people described as if in a mirror (…) The level of our literature is very bad. The number of Hebrew readers is very small (…) If we are to create a Hebrew public for ourselves, a public that reads Hebrew books and is willing to pay for them, the level of our literature will of course improve; and then… the spiritual status of our literature will improve too and our literature will become a true "people‘s-language. "*
> *In order to achieve this goal, I am initiating a great and* valuable project… I am going to publish "penny-books" for the people, little booklets sold cheaply, which will find many enthusiastic customers, even from the stingy public, the Hebrew public: A. Thanks to their low price. B. Thanks to their pleasant and useful content. The booklets will contain: stories, pictures, scenes, from people‘s lives, plays, poetry and epics and more (…) and after the people get used to spending money on books, belletristic writing will bloom. There is hope that one of these days our literature will become *a part of the people‘s needs, for slowly, slowly a Hebrew public will be created, Hebrew readers who pay money, not only for "penny-books", but also for thick books from all literary fields, books sold at a high price, and our literature will grow and expand so it will reach the same level of the literature of other peoples.*

[391]See for example: Gilboa, *The New Wave and Outside of it*.; Isaac Ben-Mordecai, "Mavo," 45-48.

And the best storytellers, writers, and poets, without a doubt will not stand idle, but they will contribute to this holy-labor, the literary labor… and they should know that I hate gifts, and God forbid I will ask them to help me in my work for free, for I will certainly pay them fully for their work.[392]

Ben-Avigdor is putting forth here the business plan for the creation of the industry of Modern Hebrew Literature, stating clearly that a Hebrew public as well as a New Hebrew literary language must be invented for this purpose. Its inspiration is in no small way drawn from the rise of Modern Yiddish literature, as it similarly strove to recreate a vernacular Hebrew language as a *folksshprakh* or a people‘s-language, as Yiddish was commonly termed. Specifically, it took some inspiration from a Yiddish publishing initiative started by Peretz and his close friend and collaborator, the Yiddish writer Yankev Dinezon (1856-1919). In Warsaw in 1890, the pair published a collection of three short stories in Yiddish by Peretz under the title *Bekante bilder* (Familiar Pictures).[393] These texts, which embody psychological complexity by employing the form of internal monologues, are considered a significant development in modern Yiddish fiction.[394] The introduction to these stories

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[392]Quoted from: Ibid, 202-206; and: Dan Miron, "*Tarbut Ivrit Hadasha Be-varsha*," (Hebrew) in: *Zman Yehudi Hadash* (New Jewish Time*s: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—An Encyclopedic View*), vol 3 (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007**)**, 347-348.

[393]Leon Peretz, *Bekante bilder* (Warsaw: Yitshak Funk, 1890), second edition in 1894, and Ale Verk vol2, 18-53. Three stories were published in this volume. "The Messenger" (*Der meshulakh*) tells the story of the dying traditional Jewish-shtetl economy in which Jews frequently acted as the middlemen between the aristocrats who owned the land and the peasants who worked the land. It does so through the story of an individual character (so in this sense it is modernist fiction) of an old man suffering from chest pains who is carrying a sum of money and a contract that he needs to deliver through extreme weather. As he travels, he is reminiscing and hallucinating about his life. The story "The Crazy Idler" ("*Der meshugener batln*"; in English it was often translated to "The Mad Talmudist") consists of an internal monologue of a person suffering from sort of a split personality disorder; as does the the less important story "What is Soul?" ("*Vos heyst neshome*?"). Ken Frieden errs when he states that in these stories "Peretz did not yet aim at social ends." (Ken Frieden, "Psychological Depth in I.L. Peretz' *Familiar Scenes*," *Jewish Book Annual* 47 (1989-90), 149). While it is true that Peretz was not yet radicalized in these stories, he nevertheless clearly carried a social message in them, namely the positivist ideal of embracing urban modern professions (very clear in "The Messenger").

[394]Ibid, 145.

(written by Dinezon), resembles the later Hebrew literature manifesto written by Ben-Avigdor,[395] although they move in somewhat opposite directions.

Dinezon states, as Ben-Avigdor would later, that the goal of his booklet is to be the first of a series called *Groshen bibliyotek* (Penny Library) "to give the reading public low priced stories from our Jewish life in our Jewish language (i.e., Yiddish), so that everyone will be able to buy, read, and understand them."[396] But they move in opposite directions regarding the prestige they wish to bestow to their respective literatures. Whereas Ben-Avigdor wished to "lower" Hebrew to the everyday life of lower class Jews, their language, taste, and concerns, and thus compensate for Hebrew's elitist status, Dinezon, seeks to introduce his readers to something as still scarcely known in Yiddish literature, namely a highbrow literature.[397] In so doing, Dinezon wants to compensate for the reputation of Yiddish literature as being vulgar and trashy (*shund*).[398]

Both Dinezon and his rival Ben-Avigdor attempt to introduce new capitalist means of literary production in their respective "national print-languages"; a move which they both viewed as a

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[395]Each was highly aware of the other. For example in his memoirs, Ben-Avigdor cites a conversation he had in 1891 with the Yiddish poet Yehoyesh cast doubts on Ben-Avigdor's "penny-library" initiative. Yehoyesh doubted that it would be possible to distribute even cheap books in great numbers "because Mr. Peretz also hoped it would be possible to distribute his booklet "Familiar Pictures" in thousand and tens of thousands, and yet he lost his own money in it."(Ben Avigdor, "*Misefer zikhronotay*," ("From My Memoirs") (Hebrew) *Ha-tzfira* (3\5\1917), 7).

[396]Yankev Dinzeon, "Introduction" to: Leon Peretz, *Bekante bilder* (Warsaw: Yitshak Funk, 1890).

[397]The first actual attempt at creating a high brow Yiddish literature was created by Sholem Aleichem in 1888\9 with his almanac *Di yudishe folks-bibliotek*. See Sholem Aleichem, "*A briv tsu a gutn fraynd*," 307-308.

[398]Dinezon writes in a very elitist condescending manner, that "Mr. Peretz does not write in order suck up to the vulgar taste of the lower class reader, the opposite, he wants to refine him and to correct him."; and he regards this series as a contrast to the "most interesting novels" (meaning the *shund*) that poured like rain and created "lots of mud" in the Yiddish literary scene. See the intro to *Bekante bilder*.

democratization of the literary book market.[399] Both were attempting to create a new "readership public" (both texts use the word *publikum* – as oppose to *der oylem\der kool* in Yiddish or *kahal* in Hebrew – in order to stress the modern "imagined" nationalist community, as oppose to the traditional one), and they will be playing the role of the bourgeois-nationalist intelligentsia for this new public. Both paved the way for Peretz's revolutionary *Yontef bletlekh*, which began to appear in 1894.[400]

Peretz's Response to the Demand for "Realism"

Ben-Avigdor's demand for "realism" as expressed in his manifest and in his programmatic story "Menahem The Writer" (1893),[401] triggered angry and cynical responses from Peretz, but also some co-operation since some of Peretz's Hebrew works were published in Ben-

[399]Fried commended the successful marketing skills of Ben-Avigdor, commenting on how the pocketbook format of the "*sifre-agora*" was issued with an external splendor that satisfied the reader "and stimulates the urge, the urge for consumption" (Fried, *Yamim ve-shanim*. Vol. 2, 152).

[400]To give a concrete example, both Ben-Avigdor's Penny-books and Peretz's Holiday Pages were sold for the low price of 5 *kopikes* a volume. B. Gorin\Goyda had a similar ambition, in regard to establishing a Yiddish parallel to Ben-Avigdor's 5 *kopeks* penny-books, but it never materialized in any substantial way (Litvak, "B. Gorin: A bisl erinerungen,", 18). More on Ben-Avigdor's early 20th century Hebrew publishing endeavors, including founding the important publishing house Tushiya and the Bibliyoteka series (which were the first ones to publish Peretz's Hebrew collected works, starting in 1899) in: Zeev Gris, "Avraham Leyb Shalkovitz ('Ben Avigdor') and the Revolution in the World of Hebrew Books at the Beginning of the 20th Century," (Hebrew) in: Yosi Goldshteyn editor, *Yosef Daat: Research in Modern Jewish History* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University), 305-328.

[401]Ben-Avidgor was influenced by the Russian literary critics of the 1860's, notably Pisarev (1840-1868) who called for a socially useful literature that reflects life as it really is, even in its lowest and most disgusting manifestations ("Mavo," [Introduction] to *Nitsane ha-Realizm ha-Siporet ha-'Ivrit* |The Buds of Realism in Hebrew Fiction], vol 1 edited by Yosef Even. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1972, 13-17). He was also influenced by the naturalist movement as expressed by Emil Zola. The Hebrew modernist writer Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921) writes how as a Yeshiva student reading Hebrew literature, the first time he encountered the term 'realism' was in the story "Menahem the Writer". Brenner also mentions how in the Yeshiva they used to call those penny-books "*ben-avigdorlekh*" ("ben-avigdors"); a combination of the name "Ben-Avigdor" with the Yiddish suffix for diminutive plural "lekh". And he mentions there how those penny-books stirred their desire to read (Y.H. Brenner, *Kol kitvei Yosef Hayyim Brenner*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ham'euḥad and Dvir, 1960), pp. 334-335).

Avigdor's "penny-books" series and in other related volumes.[402] Part of Peretz's cynical response grew out of his criticism of the Choveve Zion movement; Ben-Avigdor himself was a Zionist activist in the Choveve Zion movement.[403]

On the one hand the demand for realism in Hebrew literature comes from the literary circles of those proto-Zionist groups; but on the other hand, asserts Peretz, this Zionist literature depicts the Land of Israel in very rosy, non-realist manner.[404] In his Yiddish feuilleton *Literature and Life*, he comments at length on this inconsistency. [405]

While Peretz is critical of the Zionist plan in *Literature and Life*, he himself mimics the racist anthropological theories which claimed the cultural inferiority of native peoples, writing of Arabs and Turks that their "women are being whipped all over with bamboo sticks…"[406]

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[402] In a letter from August 1892, Peretz writes in a letter to Dinezon that he promised to write to Ben-Avigdor, but suffers from a writing block. The letter is undated (Peretz, *Briv un redes* 1929, 61-64), but according to its content it was written on 08\04\1892 (the day his story "Ir hametim" was published).

[403]Like Ahad Ha-am, Ben-Avigdor also served for while as the secretary of the society Bnei Moshe, which promoted a secular Jewish education in the spirit of Ahad Ha'am's platform of cultural Zionism (in order to "prepare the hearts" for a Jewish national revival in the Land of Israel (later would Ben-Avigdor voice strong opposion to Ahad Ha-am's ideas). For an elaborate discussion of the Bnei Moshe movement, and of Ahad-Ha'am's pivotal role in it, see the second chapter in Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[404]Only years later, a similar critic would express Y.H. Brenner, the Hebrew writer and Zionist, who was at times close to the ideology of the Bund and to Yiddishism. Brenner acted in the spirit of Peretz's advice that one should know the land if you want to write about it, and he lived in the Land of Israel itself and wrote from there. The New Wave literature tended to focus more on the "economic dramas" of Jews living in Eastern Europe, and less about the fulfillment of Zionism per se in the Land of Israel. Of course this does not indicate that it was not Zionist.

[405]See lengthy quote at the appendix at the end of this chapter.

[406]One can find also prejudiced passages about Persians in his popular science booklet about the cholera epidemic (1892): "The speed [of the spread of the epidemic] is thanks the new train, that was finished in 1888, that attached Europe to middle-Asia. The train, as all trains, did trade a great favor, but undermined our health, because it connected us with the Persians, an extremely unclean people, in addition to being terribly fanatical, and believing whole heartedly, that because the epidemic comes from God, it is forbidden to seek any cure or any advise against it, and if the doctors have somewhat of a cure, they contend the Master of the Universe with the help of demons…along with that they possess a good habit of eating with unclean hands and – the whole family from one bowl! And so it happens that if one falls ill the entire family falls with him. Thanks to the train the distance from them to us became short. (Peretz, "Ver es vil – shtarbt nisht af kholi-ra," 17). In another

These ill-conceived theories legitimized the colonial and imperial rule of the European empires over the "wild east".[407] At times these theories were espoused by Jews who wished to see themselves as being an integral part of Europe, aligned with the conquering Europe.[408] Even in "The Violin," Peretz did not raise explicit moral concerns that the Land of Israel\Palstine might in fact belong to its inhabitants. He did raise awareness, as Ahad Ha'am before him,[409] to the fact that other peoples lived there. Already in *Bildung* Peretz noted that: "The land of Israel…is not available for us, because there is a people and a government there who also have an opinion. Our claim on the land is more ancient…but our lawyer has only his mouth to speak, while against us there is an armed force…"[410] But his observation is made in the context of voicing a practical limitation; namely that the presence of others might make it hard for Jews to settle in land.

Peretz's accusation that the Hebrew New Wave writers plagiarized western literature should thus be read in an ironic light. But for Peretz, this point increases their distance from realist depictions. What Peretz does offer those who wish to write "realistically" is a kind of a

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segment he names the Persians "wild savages" who "transport dead people's bodies with merchandise and food in one cart."(Ibid, 35).

[407]See: Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

[408]See Daniel Boyarinn's application of Homi Bhabhab's concepts of "colonial mimicry" on the case of Hezrl, in Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); especially chapter 7.

[409]Ahad Ha'am famously wrote in 1891 from Palestine: "We are used to believing outside of the Land of Israel, that this land is now almost entirely empty, an unsown desert, and anybody who wishes to purchase its land will come and purchase as much as his heart desires, but truly it is not so. It is hard to find in all of the land unsown seed fields…" ("Emet me-Erets Yisra'el": 1 (Truth from the Land of Israel) (Hebrew), *ha-Melits* (Sivan 1891); Kol kitvey Ahad Ha'am, kaf"gimel).

[410]Peretz, Ale verk, vol 8, 13-14.

literary *doikayt* (a focus on the "here"): a commitment by Jews to their local society wherever they reside.

The term *doikayt* will later be coined by the Bund as its ideological foundational guideline. For Peretz, if "you live for example in Vilna – describe the filth! You are in the Jewish study-house "behind the oven" – study the cockroaches, or the wife of the sexton in a synagogue, who pours in drinks through the little window!"[411] There is clear irony in this passage as well, because not only did Peretz not believe that those Hebrew writers were living up to their realist pretensions, but also that "genuine realism" in itself was less attractive for Peretz as a literary style. He was more interested in modernist genres of writing, including symbolism and decadence.

In a literary essay in *The Arrow* (and also in *Literature and Life*, Ale verk, vol 7, 76), Peretz relates to decadent literature as one of his preferred modernist genres. The term "decadence" refers to a literary movement which was formed in late 19th century France and was inspired by the writings of Baudelaire. The movement emphasized the autonomy of art (meaning that art should be independent of moral and social concerns as preached by the 19th century French author and literary critic Théophile Gautier), the hostility of the artist to bourgeois society, the quest for new sensations, and the superiority of artifice to nature.[412]

Decadent literature met with an ambivalence response amongst the Hebrew literary circles of the time where the nationalist "Revival-Literature" enjoyed dominance from the mid 1890's onward taking its lead from the Haskalah (the "Revival-Literature" included the New Wave

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[411]"*Literatur un lebn*", 178-179; or Ale Verk, vol7, 80-81.

[412]Karl Beckson, and Arthur Ganz**,** *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*. 3rd ed. (New York: Noonday Press, 1989**)**, 56.

but also figures such as Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Berditshevsky and others, who were not part of the New Wave; besides minor efforts by Bialik[413]). It was hard at that time for Hebrew writers to identify with a literature whose founding assumptions were not linked with the idea of national revival.

In this article in *The Arrow* Peretz expressed concern that Hebrew literature was sorely lagging behind what he referred to as the world of "general literature" (meaning non-Jewish Western literature) where, "the sun of materialism has already set". Meanwhile, in Jewish circles, realism is "a new slogan that creates enthusiasm in the hearts of the people".[414]

Peretz contrasts the less sophisticated realist\naturalist literature of the New Wave with what he calls "the literature of decadence", which also bears the meaning of the total detachment of the individual from society,[415] something that at first seems an odd subject for nationalist and socialist writers to explore. In the Hebrew literature of the "nationalist revival" (meaning proto-Zionist and Zionist) a literary text that includes decadent elements could have been considered "an artistic embodiment of the Jewish malady, which (the text) is meant to heal with its vicious authenticity."[416] Peretz's progressive "ethno-class literature" on the other hand, whether in Hebrew or Yiddish, could turn its focus on the general social malady rather than on a specific Jewish one; the latter could serve as but one example of a strikingly universal problem.

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[413]Notably Bialik's poem *Rechov Ha-yehudim* ("The Jewish Street", 1894), which deeply relates to Ben-Avigdor's story "Leah, The Fish-Monger".

[414]Peretz, "*Ha-sifrut Ve-hayim*," in: *Ha-chetz*, 15-17. Also quoted in: Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature*, 20.

[415]Ibid, 13-18.

[416]Ibid, 9.

In traditional Marxist literary interpretations including the Yiddish soviet critical tradition, decadent literature was considered a reflection of a decadent society. And the decadent writer was considered to be "playing along" with society's capitalist norms, rather than criticizing those norms as they believed the great 19th century realist writers used to do. The French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) convincingly argued a counterpoint to these trends in Marxist literary criticism, which we can use to open up a new way of understanding Peretz's exploration and usage of decadent elements in his writings:

> *Either we accept a naïve and simple Marxism, and say: "such and such a society is decadent, therefore the writers who express it are decadent." Example: the great decadent of Tzarist feudalism is clearly Gorky. Or we say: "a decadent society poses new problems for a writer, tortures him in his own consciousness and in his creative activity." Otherwise, would there be any progressive people in a decadent society? Thus we must certainly consider that this society, which contains and produces the artist, also conditions him; but we are not by any means compelled to think of this author strictly as a decadent. On the contrary, he can be recuperated by a new society; and there is no certainty that, in his struggle against his own contradictions, he may not have invented the forms of the ideas which will be used by the liberated society.*[417]

In the beginning of the chapter, we established, following the work of Hamutal Bar-Yosef, that Peretz's writings in the 1894 collection *The Arrow* introduced decadent trends into Hebrew literature.[418] The shattering of the foundations of faith, rather than "a stable depiction of reality" (the realist-naturalist convention), is one of the characteristics the decadent style of

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[417]Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Novel and Reality: From Speech at a Conference of European Writers," in Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 256. Regarding the fictional character 'even' of socialist realism, Sartre said during that same talk: "Certain speakers gave the impression that socialist realism simply expresses reality. But we must not forget that socialist novels are still novels, that is to say creation. In other words, the same problem emerges, but in reverse. You may call us idealists, because we are looking for a truth or a reality which is not initially given; but we have a right to answer that you too are creating works of fiction, that you are, when it comes down to it, liars like us. Every writer lies in order to tell the truth." (ibid, 255).

[418]See: Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature*, 18-22. Bar-Yosef also detects pioneering decadent trends in Peretz's 1894 collection of Hebrew poetry "The Harp". For more on Peretz's 1890's poetry see chapter four.

writing. Thus at least in *The Arrow*, Peretz – "a progressive writer in a decadent society" – was inventing "the forms of the ideas which will be used by the liberated society", in Sartre's terms, and should not be considered strictly as decadent himself. Bar-Yosef errors when she refers to Peretz's notion of decadence as "inconsistent and incomprehensive mainly regarding his views towards nationalism."[419] It is based on her false attribution to Peretz of Sokolow's article "The Creators of Chaos" (signed Amittai),[420] where Sokolow (and not Peretz) attacked decadent historical thinking. Decadence for Peretz was an important tool both artistically in his efforts to modernize Hebrew literature, but also in his political battles against Zionism's territorialist nationalism; a tool against "Realism and Love of Zion"[421] alike. And in this regard in *The Arrow* Peretz was consistent.

Can more examples of such challenging modernist works, be found in Peretz's Hebrew prose of the 1890's? Do they indeed challenge the "new" realist-naturalist trends as set forth by Ben-Avigdor and the Hebrew New Wave? Or are his other Hebrew prose-texts of that time (meaning not those that were published in *The Arrow*, a radical publication in Hebrew from the start) more conventional than the modernist trends he calls for in his essays? Where do these texts stand with respect to his major achievements in Yiddish prose from the same period? The next section will focus on a close reading of some of Peretz's major Hebrew prose stories from the 1890's to answer these questions.

Peretz's Major Hebrew Prose and 1890's Creations

[419]Ibid, 20-21.

[420]Regarding "The Creators of Chaos", see earlier in this chapter.

[421]Y.L. Perets, "*Mikhtavim Al Odot Ha-sifrut*," in *Ha-chetz*, p.18.

The Poor Will Remain Silent

Peretz first started writing prose in 1886. His prose debut "The Kaddish" was released that year, (see fifth chapter), along with at least four other short stories in Hebrew.[422] Afterwards it took him no fewer than five years to publish another work of Hebrew prose ("Kabbalists", see fifth chapter), at the same time he was commencing his Yiddish writing career. But only in the 1890's, while he was being highly prolific in Yiddish literature, did he bring the modernizing spirit so prominent in his Yiddish work to his Hebrew writings as well. The 1890's will also be the last decade in which Peretz created original prose in Hebrew.

As we have seen in the last two chapters, Peretz often introduces the reader to female figures who are central characters in his stories, for example, in the Yiddish stories: "A Disturbed Sabbath,"(1892), "In the Basement," "A Woman's Wrath," (both 1893), and also in the Hebrew story "The Mute"(1892).[423] "The Mute" was published as a part of the *sifre-agora* series, alongside the short story "*Manginat ha-zman*". As in Ben-Avigdor's story, "Leah, The Fish-Monger" (1891), and other Hebrew New Wave stories, Peretz's story "The Mute" is a sentimental depiction of the lives of lower-class Jewish women in the shtetl. They are "the lowest of the low"; in the sense that the protagonist is a low-class Jewish woman who is also mute. As much as Peretz ridiculed Ben-Avigdor and his demand for realism in Hebrew literature, in this story Peretz seems to follow Ben-Avigdor's manifesto: he uses a "thin" non-referential Hebrew and "low language" (meaning in practice a Yiddishized version of Hebrew); he depicts lower class Jews; and he devises a plot set in the present time that is

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[422]See Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 129-131.

[423]Ruth Adler, "Peretz's Empathic Linkage To Woman," *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1975-1979)* Vol. 3, No. 2, Conference on Modern Jewish Studies Annual (Winter 1977-78), p. 52. Published by: Penn State University Press, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41203768 .

devoid of any fantastic elements. Many of the conventions of 19th century naturalist fiction can be found in this story which is also characterized by tragic irony and the helplessness of the protagonists against external dominant forces.

But what differentiates Peretz's story, and which introduces modernist elements to it, are the mixture of narration styles and the usage of the fragmentation technique,[424] the same techniques he employed and perfected in his Yiddish fiction.[425] The fragmented narration is built through three different elements, which move in a circular motion. The first element is a storyteller who tells the story with a constant flow of commentary. Second is the light-hearted and humorous dialogue of the two *yidenes*[426] who explain the status of Khana the mute in the present time (when she is around thirty years of age) – and who function as the story's choir, appearing in the beginning and the end of the story. Finally, there is the central inner-story surrounding the miserable life of Khana from the age of fifteen.[427]

The story's treatment of the poor is sentimental, which eliminates the possibility of viewing "the poor" as a revolutionary subject: the story is set in a non-industrialized *shtetl* reality not the urban reality of "the proletariat". There is class conflict in the story, between the protagonist Khana and her upwardly mobile beloved Yaakov, but it is blurred by the

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[424]Isaac Ben-Mordecai, Mavo [Introduction] to *Nitsane ha-Realizm ha-Siporet ha-'lvrit* |The Buds of Realism in Hebrew Fiction], vol 2, 34.

[425]See: Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*". The fragmented structure of inner-stories and complex narration style in "The Mute" is also correctly viewed by Niger as characteristic for Peretz (Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 255).

[426]*"yidenes"*(according to the Weinreich dictionary) = petty, sentimental, talkative Jewish women.

[427]Isaac Ben-Mordecai, *Mavo* [Introduction] to *Nitsane ha-Realizm ha-Siporet ha-'lvrit* |The Buds of Realism in Hebrew Fiction], vol 2, 34-35. Ben-Mordecai sees the mixture of the pathetic (the life of Khana and of her two orphaned children) and the comic (the discursive exchange between the two *yidenes*) as the feature that stands out the most at first.

dominant narrative discourse of romantic love.[428] Still, it is correct to view "The Mute" as a transitional story between the positivist-nationalist stand of "In the Mail Coach", and the more radical-socialist stand detected in such stories like "Bontshe The Silent" and "A Woman's Wrath"; since it does expose the hypocritical norms of the nascent bourgeois Jewish society.[429]

The story tells of Khana, a young woman, who became mute after seeing her beloved Yaakov in flames. The cruel irony is that Khana lost her speech as a result of the trauma, but Yaakov not only survived but bloomed. At first, he remained faithful to Khana despite her muteness, but he eventually moved on with his professional career as a doctor, and we are lead to understand that while at university (outside the familiar *shtetl* spatial reality), he moved on romantically as well. Yaakov's father tells Khana that his son "stopped being sad and staying at home, because he was invited to a ball (*neshef-kheshek*) at the home of a very rich man, where he danced with all the women and the young ladies… have you heard? He even knows how to dance."[430] This, and the news that huge sums of money are offered by fathers who want their daughters to marry Yaakov, leads Khana to a total mental breakdown. To add to the bitter *Zolaesque* irony – Yaakov now acts as her doctor, but handles her in the same insensitive manner with which he treats the rest of his poor patients. Gershon Shaked correctly asserts that Peretz inherited this theme of "miserable love" from the Haskala literature before him, but that in contrast to the Haskala literature, here the source of

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[428]Of course one could argue that both discourses are intertwined in the story by a way which "all of the troubles and pains of the mute stem from Yaakov's class-position being changed."(See: ibid, 36).

[429]Shenfeld, "The Family Crisis," 350.

[430]Peretz, *Ha-ilemet*, *Manginat ha-zman*, 14-15.

destruction of the family lies not in backward religious laws, but in the social condition.[431] Khana, who even before the fire was referred to as "Khana the pale" is now obliged to marry the good-hearted but physically repellant Zaynvel the *melamed* (a traditional teacher of Hebrew). Shenfeld views the unflattering description of Zaynvel's physical shape – he is a hunchback, with a thick crooked nose, and a big wart on his left cheek together with the detailed accounts of the material environment, the petty social-conditions, and the strong fatalist elements – as representing the naturalist elements in the story.[432] But the figure of the "ugly *melamed*" is also a literary convention that is familiar to readers since the Haskalah period (see for example in the works of Smolanskin), long before the Naturalist trends entered Hebrew literature. It is impossible to find in modern Hebrew-Yiddish fiction a *melamed*-character who happens to be good looking.

It is unnecessary to recount all of the of the plot's twists and turns; most of them include the mental and physical death of individuals and of the family unit, collapsing under the pressures social-economic hardship: both Khana's father and Zaynvel die, she had two children by Zaynvel, and her fate is not a cheery one. Khana is a voiceless figure, who stands in for the Jewish women who are all mutes. She is the title and central character, unlike in Peretz's Yiddish story "In the Mail Coach" where women are merely discussed by men but do not make any actual physical appearances.

> *The bold description of Khana's sexual encounters with her physically deformed husband Zaynvel are in effect a literary depiction of rape which is her nightmarish reality: Every night a dark dread befell her and she would run out of the house into the yard, and she would stand at the gate immersed in her many thoughts. Then when her father would take her from there and bring her home using great force,*

[431]In this sense, it is similar to Peretz's Hebrew story "A Maiden Marries", see: Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction*, 151.

[432]See: Shenfeld, "The Family Crisis," 349-350.

all her bones were shivering out of fear and she couldn't stand on her feet, and against her will she fell on the bed. But no matter what, she wouldn't permit him to undress her. Instead she screamed and bit and ripped her father's face with her nails and the faces of the neighbor women who helped him; but by the time her husband Zaynvel approached her she had no strength left and she didn't continue to struggle. She lay as a log on the bed moving as little as she could. Her thoughts became confused and she stopped knowing what was happening to her…
Since the day Zaynvel came into the house scarcity did not trouble them as before.[433]

Peretz is clearly criticizing here the barbaric treatment of women, depicting how the female body was sold for material gain. It is not radically different from the enslaved women in 19th century America, who "lived with the constant reality of rape because they were the property of their white male masters."[434] Like those enslaved women, who "did not easily give up their rights over their bodies and tried to keep some form of perceived control over their bodies and their lives",[435] Khana also struggled as much as she could, but is incapable of single-handedly defeating such a coalition of men and women who are out to subordinate her to the will of the male provider. The material gain turns out to be all but temporary and fails to save the family later from destruction.

Linguistically, Peretz's Hebrew does not stray from Ben-Avigdor's aesthetic demands. In fact, he follows them, emulating the Yiddish speech of lower class Jewish women by using a "quasi-*Yiddishi*" Hebrew speech which includes many direct quotes from Yiddish. For example, the term "*merak ha-zahav*" (Y:"*gildene yoykh*") – means "a wedding soup" and it ironically refers in the story to the ugly Zaynvel in Khana's eyes the day after their wedding. Some of these direct-translations appear in the Hebrew with quotation marks and thus stick

[433]Peretz, *Ha-ilemet*, *Manginat ha-zman*, 16-17.

[434]Susanne Scholz uses the stories about rape of enslaved women in 19th century America as a point of departure for her discussion about the stories of rape in the bible. See: Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2010), 53-55.

[435]Idem.

out even more; because as a general rule this Hebrew style of prose was heavily influenced by Yiddish, a fact that Peretz tried to tone down in the version which later appeared in the version of the story published by Dvir in his Hebrew Collected Works.[436]The language is "thin", meaning it does not make references to traditional Jewish texts. Instead, it follows Ben-Avigdor's aesthetic demands that the words should stand on their own.

Barthes maintained that the language of realist literature – in this case the non-Biblical Yiddishized version of Hebrew – helps confirm the prejudice that there is indeed a form of "standard" language which is somehow natural[437]. In effect, a "realist language" which claims to be representational strengthens the modernist idea of a standardized national-language. By differentiating itself from "colloquial" types of speech, the national-language is made to be seen as something "natural" that does exist, rather than just the product of the imagination of the nationalist-intelligentsia.

In regard to nationalizing the Jewish languages, in Hebrew one needed to imagine a spoken language, in effect a language that relies on Yiddish for its syntax and expressions, since spoken Hebrew was barely taking its first steps at the time, and mostly in Palestine.[438] In Yiddish one had to polish the idea of a standard literary language, even more so than in Hebrew. Peretz was very aware of the need to create a standard literary Yiddish language, and permitted himself to write in colloquial Yiddish only when he wrote in a dialogue format.

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[436]See the "wedding soup" example in Perets, *Ha-ilemet, Manginat ha-zman*, 16. To give a few more samples:"*Lama takshi kushiya kazot*?" (Y:"*Far vos fregstu aza min kasha*?"), "*ofel yikkhehu*" (Y:"*der shvarts yor zol im nemen*"), "*yasim eyno aleha*" (Y:"*vet leygn an oyg af ir*"), "*neshama kshera*" (Y:"*a koshere neshome*"), and many others.

[437]Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 117.

[438]See Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (California: University of California Press, 1993), 81-182.

Otherwise he used a version of Yiddish that he believed would be comprehensible to speakers in all geographical locations where the language was spoken. Werses claims that this strategy contributed to an intensified sense of alienation in Peretz's Yiddish texts between the modern storyteller's voice and the common people he interacts with,[439] but he forgets the dialectical relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, namely the New Wave's effort – with Peretz's participation in stories like "The Mute" and others – to create a spoken Hebrew literary language from scratch.[440]

The language of another Hebrew story by Peretz "*Bime'on kayitz*" ("In a Summer House", 1893)[441] deserves discussion as well. The language and the tone of "In a Summer House" are utterly different from those prescribed by Ben-Avigdor; and when they do come close to conforming to his conventions, they do so in order to relativize them and put them under a critical eye. The story is written mostly in a rich poetic language, and features three full-blown romantic poems: one is an original by Peretz;[442] another is a translation of a German romantic poem by Chamisso; and finally, a "merry folksong", similar to many others of its kind written in Yiddish by various writers and in other languages. This story's main theme is the meaning of love and the different expressions it finds among people of different social classes. It ends humorously with the beloved expressing fear of pregnancy to her suitor:

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[439]Shmuel Werses, *Sipur ve-shorsho: 'iyunim be-hitpatbut ha-prosa ha-'ivrit* (Story and Source: Studies in the Development of Hebrew Prose]. Ramat Gan: Massada, 1971, p. 125.

[440]Peretz was even active for a while at the beginning of the 1890's in *Safa Brura* (Clear Language) – a group that set itself to promote Hebrew as a spoken language. He mentions them his Yiddish article *Bildung* (see Ale verk, vol8, 8), and he even gave lectures in Hebrew (with a Polish accent) addressing topics such as Jewish education. But he became doubtful and changed his attitude towards them along the years.

[441]Y"L Perets, "Be-maon Kaits," (Hebrew) *Luah Ahiasaf* 1 (1893), pp. 75-82*; Or Kol kitvey, resh"nun-resh"nun-gimel. A Yiddish version of the story Af a zumer voynung came out in 1901*.

[442]It would later appear in Peretz's Hebrew poetry collection "Ha-ugav" (1894), see next chapter.

I was afraid, my beloved, I was afraid that
Our secret love would be revealed…
And then my mother would ask, ha, my daughter,
Why is your gown so narrow? [443]

Thus, as Peretz acknowledged in his writing, he is "by his nature a hopeless romantic"[444] who reduced the New Wave's call for realism in Hebrew literature to "*Oys romantik*! *Oys poezye*!" ("No more romance! No more poetry!);[445] so this story can be viewed as a romantic response to the realist\naturalist demands of the New Wave. And in that sense it is unclear why Peretz apparently placed this story in the category of "angry" stories.[446]

This story was published in the first volume of the Hebrew yearly almanac *Luakh akhiasaf* (1893-1904[447]), one of Ben Avigdor's endeavors. It was a Zionist publication and the only stage of expression for the New Wave writers since the decline of his penny library in 1894.[448] Because of its unique place for the New Wave writers, their literary conventions

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[443]Y"L Perets, "*Be-maon Kaits*," (Hebrew) *Luah Ahiasaf* 1 (1893), pp. 75-82; Or Kol kitvey, resh"nun-resh"nun-gimel. Quoted also in: Hillel Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef: shirat ḥibat tziyon* (A History of Hebrew poetry, volume 1: The Ḥibat Tziyon period) (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poʿalim, 1987), 279.

[444]"*Literatur un lebn*", in: Ale Verk, vol7, 86.

[445]Ibid, 75.

[446]See Olgin, "A Day with I.L. Peretz," in *Y.L. Peretz*, 21.

[447]Ben-Avigdor left *Luakh akhiasaf* in 1895 after being the editor of three volumes, and went on to form the publishing house Tushiya.

[448]The publishing house for *Luakh akhiasaf* was the newly formed *Akhiasaf*. In his Yiddish feuilleton "*Di karnake nervn*" ("The Sick Nerves", published in the fifth volume of the *Yontef bletlekh*), Peretz describes how *Akhiasaf* tried to convince book-sellers to take Peretz's radical publications in Hebrew and Yiddish The Arrow and the *Yontef bletlekh* off their bookshelves; and declared a boycott against Pinski's works that Peretz published (the story "R' Shloyme" and the essay "The Monkeys"). "Why are these people running so manically?" asks Peretz, because:

"…besides "Akhiasaf" another person permitted himself to write and to publish in Hebrew! {…} Because I cannot convince myself that people can with one Ha-chetz and 5-6 Yontef bletlekh cause so much damage! {…} I only hope that with time the readers would develop a better taste, that with time

were clearly reflected in this almanac, most prominently by showcasing the works of Reuven Braynin (1862-1939), Ezra Goldin (1868-1915), Ben-Avigdor himself and other New Wave writers. It was founded after the relative financial success of the "penny-library", and the first three volumes under Ben-Avigdor were rich with literary contents.[449]

"In a Summer House" was published not long before Peretz published his very critical essays (two in 1894) challenging the literary norms set forth by Ben-Avigdor in his manifesto. The main question to ask then is whether this critique was reflected in the language used in the story and in any other aspect of the story itself, or rather, did it conform to the esthetic conventions of the New Wave, as in "The Mute"? And if Peretz's story does differ from the New Wave in its aesthetic structuring, does the story also differ from the New Wave in its political-ideological stance?

The storyteller character is once again a modern urban Jew touring the provinces. But unlike *Bilder fun a provints rayze* where the province meant the backward and depressing *shtetl*, alien to the modern Jewish writer character, in this Hebrew story the province is a refuge. Here, the modern Jew, like any good bourgeois European, is going to the country to relax in

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> *will our average Jew open his eyes and recognize, who are his enemies and who are his friends… {…} But until that time comes, can the sons of Akhiasaf become rich, and when the time comes – turn over the little wind-mill and grind even social-democracy."("Di treyst", 1894; or Ale verk, vol8, 60-62).*

This harsh criticism mind you, did not stop Peretz from publishing again in *Luakh akhiasaf*. For example, in its eighth volume his story "*Iskey kahal*" was published there.

[449]See: Hagit Cohen, *At the Bookseller's Shop: The Jewish Book Trade in Eastern Europe at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006), 74-75. And also in: Eli Levin, "Shana Tova to the New Wave: 118 Years to the Publication of ""Luakh Am Akhiasaf" – A Central Stage for Modern Hebrew Literature at the Turn of the Centuries," (Hebrew) *Haaretz*, September 28, 2011, accessed October 16, 2012, http://www.haaretz.co.il/1.1485052 . The official name of the almanac at first was: *Luakh-Am Akhiasaf*, which is parallel to the name of a Yiddish almanac that came out in the same years: the Yidish *folks-kalander* (Jewish People's Calendar).

accordance with his doctor's advice. He rents a room at a home of a Jewish merchant named Reb Avraham, whose son Shmuel is about to be married. The plot begins with humoristic commotion around the petty financial disputes between the two matchmakers and between the fathers of the bride and groom, which almost result in the cancelation of the wedding. The protagonist feels he needs to escape this anti-romantic "realist" atmosphere of "*olam ha-kheshbon*" ("the world of arithmetic"),[450] signaling a shift to a different, more genuine, authentic and heartfelt meaning of love.

In the second part of the story, the romantic yearnings of the protagonist surface through his communion with nature. He expressed these yearnings in the first part of the story in his sensual depiction of the bride going for a short outdoor stroll with the groom in order to escape the commotion.[451] Peretz's transitional passage paints an exhilarating impressionistic sketch of the modern man's encounter with nature:

> *The day's place was taken over by the evening… and I'm still sitting on the bank of the river without knowing what is going on inside the house.*
> *The sun is disappearing into the depths of blood and fire while the moon is rising out of the mist to wander like a hen among her chicks, the stars. I sit within the protection of the woods… the pure sky from above and the image of the woods are reflected in the crystal water below. The sound of the little waves chasing each other like playful children, the foam on the azure of the water, the shiver of the leaves of the woods, together with the soul of the grass and the flowers overlaid with the drops of dew, night flakes, the voice of the nightingale between the branches – all of these carried me on the wings of spring to the world of nobility (olam ha-atsilut)…*

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[450]*Luah akhiasaf* 1 (1893), p. 79; or Kol kitvey, resh"nun-alef. Also in "*Bilder fun a provints rayze*" the modern protagonist does need to believe and wishes to avoid the world of numbers and statistics. At the end of this story it is referred to as "*emek ha-kheshbon*" – "the valley of arithmetic" (Ibid, 82; ibid, resh"nun-gimel).

[451]"The bride is a very pretty girl; she is a rose flower that had not yet bloomed; but I feel that one kiss is enough in order to awaken the sleeping woman inside this young gentle body! One kiss is enough in order to create a gust in her chest, to light candles in the apples of her eyes, to give a breath of paradise to her nose and burning lips to her mouth…"(ibid, 77; ibid, resh"nun). This style is a clear diversion from the ugly realistic physicality of "The Mute".

> *My heart expanded and became as big as the gate of a world and it filled with the sorrow of all creatures and the love of the whole world, and my soul became weary within me from yearning and dreaming…*[452]

Peretz uses this transformative journey between "*olam ha-kheshbon*" to "*olam ha-atsilut*" to redirect his readers away from the strangling esthetics demanded by the New Wave movement to what he sees as liberating ones: a modernist neo-romantic impressionist literature.[453] In this dreamy-associative literature, prose and poetry and drama intertwine as much as dreams and reality mingle. The Hebrew may not be heavily referential, and the story does take place in the present time, but it does not deal in any way with desperate living conditions or with the struggle for survival. One's impression of the beauty of nature replaces the observation of the ugliness of the downtrodden.

In the dreamy second part of the story, the protagonist hears a simple young sailor singing to his beloved. The country people's love is of honest and noble manner; they speak in elevated Hebrew poetry between themselves, not the language of numbers and finance. In this idyll "nature is the matchmaker."[454]

While analyzing Schiller's hermeneutic system, Jameson tells us that according to Schiller "the notion of a realization of freedom in art becomes concrete only when… (it descends) into the detail of the work of art itself". In the detail of the work of itself, Schiller asks us: "to see the very technical construction of the work as a *figure* of the struggle for psychic integration in general, to see in images, quality of language, type of plot construction the very

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[452]Ibid, 79; ibid, resh"nun-alef.

[453]The term "*olam ha-atsilut*" also has kabalistic meaning as one of the four elementary spiritual worlds.

[454]Y.L. Ben-David, "A Conversation in the World of Literature," (Hebrew) *Hatzfira* 228, Nov 1893: p. 3.

figures (in an imaginary mode) of freedom itself."[455] If we arrive at political freedom through beauty,[456] then the idyll genre, writes Jameson, is the third logical possibility (after the elegiac and the satiric modes).[457]

The idyll genre imagines the possibility of the "genuinely free and harmonious personality"[458] to become real some day when different and liberating social conditions should arise. For Peretz, this personality is embodied in the figure of the young singing sailor and his beloved country girl; their oneness with nature means they achieved what the modern protagonist is yearning for. The sailor's genuine love, poetic language, and images represent for Peretz the beauty which would make it possible for people to arrive at true political freedom. Stanzas such as these detail the all-encompassing totality of such love, creating within the reader an elevation of the soul:

Mitskhekh ha-zakh li raki"a
Yahelu sham khokhvey eynayikh;
Biladekh tsalmavet kol kheldi,
Ki shimshi- ha-tskhok al sfatayikh.

At ori, at khayay! Biladayikh
Ani regev ben rigvey adama!
Ya"an akh mingohot eynayikh

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[455]Fredrick Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, 1971), 91; also quoted in: Lesley Sharpe, *Schiller's Aesthetic Essays: Two Centuries of Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 114.

[456]Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 86.

[457]"Insofar as modern sensibility incapable of any genuine concrete reunification or at-one-ment with the world, still finds it in itself to dream of such a state of plenitude, attempts to project forth an impoverished vision of what such a state might be like, there is room for yet a third logical possibility, namely the idyll, whose irreality is inscribed in the very thinness of its poetic realization itself" (Ibid, 92-93).

[458]Ibid, 115; also quoted in: Sharpe, *Schiller's Aesthetic Essays*, 114.

Nafshi baseter nirkama;[459]
(Your pure forehead is my sky,
The stars of your eyes will make it their tent;
Without you shadow of death is all my life,
For my sun-is the laughter on your lips.
You are my light, you are my life! Without you
I'm a clod amongst clods of earth!
Because only from the light in your eyes
My soul was secretly woven;)

In these verses, the speaker's voice is that of a passionate and soulful individual; six singular possessives ("my") appear in just two short stanzas. Simultaneously, the narrator universalizes the facial features of the female subject (forehead, eyes, lips), and associating them with their fundamental qualities (sky, sun, earth). In turn, he is filling the universe with his genuine sense of love. For the sailor, the lack of love equals death. The sailor's emotional totality becomes a source of inspiration for the urban alienated subject who hears them and starts to open-up emotionally. He hears how the voice of the sailor mingles with the waves and how one wave calls to the other: "Love! And the silver foam on the water's blueness utters: Love! And the nightingale between the tree branches gushes in his pleasant voice: Love! Love! And also my soul is gushing inside me, for it is too lovesick…"[460] The transformation of the protagonist's soul in this passage is the transformative vision that Peretz sees as the true role of art, as opposed to pretending to reflect the world as is.

If the rape scene in "The Mute" allegedly reflects reality in all its crudeness and cruelty, so the discussion regarding the meaning of love in "In a Summer House" provides an alternative esthetic vision. If in "The Mute" "*neshef-kheshek*" (a ball) meant a corrupted scene of the

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[459]*Luah akhiasaf* 1 (1893), p. 80; or Kol kitvey, resh"nun-alef.

[460]Idem; idem.

decadent upper-classes abandoning the simple folks, in "In a Summer House" it is the sailor's singing voice that causes the leaves in the wood to start shaking in their own organic "*neshef-kheshek*."[461] The mixture of literary genres that Peretz contrasts in this story creates the modernist fragmented feeling that Peretz wished to infuse in his text.

The modernizing role that Peretz took upon himself in Hebrew literature in the 1890's should be examined also through this story "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease" (1893), which was published in Nahum Sokolow's almanac *Ha-asif*.[462] Sokolow was the editor of the Warsaw Hebrew daily *Ha-tsfirah*, where Peretz published much of his Hebrew work. Sokolow also shared Peretz's critical view towards the New Wave in Hebrew literature and Ben-Avigdor's realistic\naturalist pretensions. In the same volume of *Ha-asif*, Sokolow published two reviews of Ben-Avigdor's stories ("Menahem the Writer", and "R' Shifra"),[463] in which he expressed his critical views towards the New Wave's esthetics. Sokolow mocks Ben-Avigdor's attempts to make impossible and intangible cultural-political synthesis, creating "realism-idealist-nationalist-cosmopolitan."[464] It is unsurprising then that Peretz found a home publishing such a gothic-macabre-psychologist-modernist story as "A Night of Horror" in a publication by someone who shared a great deal of his esthetic views.[465]

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[461]*Luah akhiasaf* 1 (1893), p. 82; or Kol kitvey, resh"nun-bet.

[462]I.L. Peretz, "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease,"(Hebrew) *Haasif* 6 (1893), 136-145; or Kol kitvey, resh"yud-tet – resh"kaf-hey.

[463]Nahum Sokolow, "Menahem the Writer: A literary Picture by Ben-Avigdor"; "Rabi Shifra: A Story by Ben-Avigdor", (Hebrew) *Haasif* 6 (1893), 213-224.

[464]Ibid, 219.

[465]Peretz also published a poem and a feuilleton in the same volume of *Ha-asif*. The feuilleton wittily referred to a proposition to found a financial support-society for Hebrew writers. Peretz dramatized a fictional discussion of writers on the matter, in which he asks:

"Who amongst the writers would be accepted as a member of the support-society?"

Certainly this was not a case of "biting the hand that feeds", as Peretz arguably did when he published his romantic anti-New Wave story "In a Summer House" in the most important publication of the New Wave.

The story "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease" consists of the inner thoughts – the novel form in Hebrew and Yiddish literature of an internal-monologue – of one character, Mr. Finkelman during one sleepless nightmarish night. His thoughts are torn schematically between his masculine side and his feminine; between a psychological identification with his father or his mother (and wife); and between a heartless and crude capitalist mindset (he is a rich and ruthless businessman) and a compassionate socialist one.[466]

Like other Hebrew stories by Peretz from the period including "The Thought and the Violin" and "In a Summer House", the story "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease" relies heavily on storytelling that centers around a series of contrasts and oppositions. If in "In A Summer House" the thematic contrast that Peretz put forth between "*olam ha-*

> *To this question I received many answers:*
> *"Everybody – besides the critics who dance on the blood of their fellow writers!*
> *Everybody – besides the writers who write in the spoken language [i.e., Yiddish] on a regular or on a casual basis, because they humiliate the value of literature to the level of the mob.*
> *Everybody (I recognized the voice of Menahem the writer) besides he who is not an enthusiastic nationalist and a supporter of the Choveve Tsiyon movement. The society should be idealist-realist, its members should be realists-idealists and indeed nationalism and Choveve Tsiyon are realism and idealism or idealism and realism which hitmalgemu* and became one! *This word was recently renewed by Menahem the writer, and without a doubt will come out soon in print, may God be with him and may he rise to success!"" (Y.L. Perets, "About the "Shulkhan arukh"," (Hebrew)* Haasif *6 (1893), 205).*

[466]These contradictions can be presented schematically, as all these three sets of contradictions are parallel to one another as: masculine\father\capitalist vs. feminine\mother + wife\socialist. Or it can be read as a clash between two sets of merged gender-psychological-social elements.

kheshbon" to "*olam ha-atsilut*" reflects contrast of genre – between the bourgeois comedy and the idyll; in "A Night of Horror", like in "The Thought and the Violin" and in "The Teaching of Hasidim"[467] (both in *The Arrow*, the central contrast is reflected thematically but not in its genre.[468] Meaning that in order to create a modernist fragmented feeling in "A Night of Horror", Peretz has to use other literary methods (like the use of internal-monologue) than the mixture of literary genres.

There are two other significant contrasts that are presented. One is between *forgetting* and *remembering*: the protagonist struggles to remember the terrible thing that happened earlier that day, and while doing so, he looks back at events from the past and from his childhood. The second contrast is between *life* and *death*, and between *the living* and *the dead*, using the Dance-Macabre motif, a motif that Peretz would later develop in his large-scale symbolist drama "At Night by the Old Marketplace" and in his Hebrew story previously discussed in this chapter, "The Violin". A morbid-gothic sense throughout the story indicates a morbid solution to the plot as the protagonist discovers at the end of the story that his wife has passed away.

The protagonist, Mr. Finkleman, expresses inherent existential ambivalence,[469] as both a bourgeois and an anti-bourgeois figure; it is a specifically gothic kind of ambivalence.[470] Finkelman's mental disorder and the set of binary oppositions Peretz depicts within him, can

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[467]See fifth chapter. "The Teaching of Hasidim" is discussed in the fifth chapter.

[468]See also: Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 261.

[469]Or more clinically accurate his bi-polar disorder; like the protagonist in his 1890 Yiddish story "*Der meshugener batln*".

[470]See Terry Eagleton's Marxist reading of the Brontes in: Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) {first published in 1975}, 104-105; quoted in: Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2007), 70.

be found explicitly a few times in the text as Finkelman's conflicted inner-thoughts, for example in this one:

> *If his wife would turn her eyes away he would turn himself over and change as ink does; then the spirit of his father would revive him, then the spirit of true business would wrap him in his wings, then the silver – a loadstone, the gold his heart and soul's desire! Then depression would befall him, his room would become a dark room, hell, he and the businessmen – nightmarish demons who wrestle one against the other with their hands, with shrewdness, with cheating, with deceit… then an attack-war for life or death!*
> *But silence! The sound of a dress would be heard, her little feet stepped on the entry to his room, all of a sudden – and there is light, every face is laughing, every eye is shining… there is no shrewdness and no power, justice-justice you shall pursue, love dominates, brotherhood and comradeship! (…)*

Now he realized his status is in constant change: one time he is his father's incarnation, and another time he is his mother's.[471]

Peretz's "scientific experiment" of exploring psychiatric illness might seem overly simplistic and schematic to many readers.[472] Niger maintains that the very fact that he makes the experiment and examines the subject of psychological abnormality was a novelty in Hebrew literature and an achievement in its own right.[473] Niger thus ignores the significant number of stories in Hebrew literature, starting from the late 1870's – notably with Smolanskin's "*Torat Ha-no'ar*", 1878; and Abramovitsh's "*Susati*", 1886 – which dealt with insanity. Bar-Yosef contends that Hebrew writers absorbed the late 19th century pre-Freudian psychopathological

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[471]Perets, "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease," 138-139; or Kol kitvey, resh"kaf-alef.

[472]Werses points out how one of the characteristics of Peretz's art of storytelling is indeed organizing his texts schematically "as geometrical shapes". These symmetrical structures can be found, besides in "A Night of Horror", also in such stories as "Four Generations – Four Wills", "Ghosts are Telling", What is Soul", "The Fur Hat", and others (See: Werses, *Sipur ve-shorsho*, 130-132).

[473]See: Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 256.

contemporary thought.[474] Of course, 19th century European literature was full of madman diaries, most famously Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" (1835) which influenced all of the Eastern European Jewish writers.

As previously shown, Peretz himself had previously experimented with the insanity theme in his Yiddish writings – *as in Bilder fun a provints rayze* (1891; see first chapter), "The Crazy Idler" (1890; see N 97 in this chapter); and even in his earliest Hebrew prose with his story "The Dybbuk and the Crazy Person" (1886).[475] But beyond the false attribution of novelty to Peretz, it is questionable whether "novelty" matters much in the first place. What does matter is what the writer actually achieved with this motif, and how he did it.

The psychological abnormality of the protagonist is surrounded by a deep gothic sense and reasoned by the influence of gothic literature on the protagonist himself. Finkelman remembers that his father was tough with him as a child so that he wouldn't grow up to be a coward, (in his words "a woman"), but:

> *Even more so, his father got mad over his mother's nighttime stories, which were always woven out of fear: fear of souls of the dead, of moonlight and grave shadows…*

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[474]Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "Hebrew Pre-Freudian Psychopathology at the Turn of the Centuries," (Hebrew) *Sadan: Research in Hebrew Literature: Hebrew Literature at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (Tel Aviv University, 2000), 37-71.

[475]*Haasif* 3 (1893), 627-633. Bar-Yosef also sees traces in Peretz's Hebrew article "Mental Sickness Amongst Writers" (*The Arrow*, 1894) of Max Nordau's idea that the European literature of the end of the 19th century is written by people who are mentally ill (plus influences of Paul Bourget and Nietzsche). Peretz writes in this article:"The psychology of this time smashed the human's soul, which before then was perceived by the wise men as total unity, to little shreds. There is no will as a unique spirit that stands on its own, but rather desires and objects; there is no one whole character, but rather a mixture of different characteristics. There is no comprehensive brain, but rather perceptions and emotions. And when the person is healthy, then all the spiritual visions unify to be one spirit, and if the person becomes sick, then many souls would split up in him and different characteristics would alternate one after the other." (Peretz, *The Arrow*, 19; also quoted in Bar-Yosef, "Hebrew Pre-Freudian Psychopathology at the Turn of the Centuries"). See also the insane protagonist in Peretz's Hebrew short story "The Violin", which is discussed earlier in this chapter.

And once, he was locked in a dark room for an entire night, in order to drive away any false fears from him. In the morning, when they unlocked the door of his cell, he was found foundering between life and death…

During that night – he told her – I suffered all the torments of hell, all the dead rose up from their graves and surrounded me… demons, gremlins, and dark spirits harassed me, until I fainted…

And in his heart he imagined that then he had indeed lost his sanity and he became an empty dummy to alternately receive the soul of his father or the soul of his mother.[476]

The gothic elements here are grounded in psychological-realist reasoning. Andrew Smith points out in his analysis of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" – perhaps the most famous gothic story to highlight a multi personality disorder – that Hyde is separated from Jekyll along a social scale as well as a moral one. "Hyde becomes associated with a specific fear of the working class… his very existence suggests that the class hierarchy can be collapsed because it is reversible."[477]

In Peretz's tale, the mother's stories filled the child with fear of the violence of the lower-classes. However her intent was to rally support for welfare policies that could ease and defuse social tensions. Conversely, his father insisted that his son needed to overcome these fears, disregard the pain caused by rising social gaps, and this in manner to gain an even stronger dominance over the lower classes.

In order to fully decipher this story one must first further understand the social significance of gothic literature, over the sociality of Peretz's 1890's Hebrew prose. Fortunately, Fredrick Jameson's analysis of gothic films applies to gothic literature as well. Here is how Jameson defines the "gothic":

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[476]Ibid, 141; or: ibid, resh"kaf-bet – resh"kaf-gimel.

[477]Andrew Smith**,** Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 169.

> *Gothics are indeed ultimately a class fantasy (or nightmare) in which the dialectic of privilege and shelter is exercised: your privileges seal you off from other people, but by the same token they constitute a protective wall through which you cannot see, and behind which therefore all kinds of envious forces may be imagined in the process of assembling, plotting, preparing to give assault; it is if you like, the shower-curtain syndrome (alluding to Hitchcock's Psycho).*[478]

Applying this definition to Peretz's story "In a Night of Horror", it seems that the text indeed wishes to uncover the dialectic of privilege and shelter. Mr. Finkelman constantly fears the elements which he sees as holding him back from increasing his fortune without restraint. He is constantly moving between a strong sense of admiration for the women figures in his life: his wife and mother, who both died young; and a sense of anger towards those same female figures because they functioned (according to the formulaic logic of the story) as barriers preventing him from accumulating more wealth: "if it wasn't for Miriam, he now would have had four times as much wealth from he owns now…"[479]

Jameson further writes that perhaps the only particular political significance of such gothic texts consists "in a coming to self-consciousness of the disadvantages of privilege in the first place."[480] Does Peretz's Mr. Finkelman become self-conscious of the disadvantages of privilege by the end of the story?

Towards the end, the tension between his love for his wife Miriam and the value of accumulating wealth reaches its fatal climax. Endless numbers and calculations are running around in Finkelman's head – exactly how much money is he loosing for her sake? He is

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[478]Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (U.S.: Duke University Press, 1991), 289.

[479]Peretz, "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease," 138; or *Kol kitvey*, resh"kaf-alef.

[480]Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 289.

trying to calculate the sums of money he could have possessed if it wasn't for his desire to please his wife. He sees numbers and digits in growing amounts:

> *And suddenly the numbers became colorful financial-bills… and the board became an open box! And the bills were flying all around like birds in his brain, and a mysterious hand would lay them down in the box… out of nowhere she would press and push the bills and his brain was about to pop!...*
> *And the pressure in his brain becomes stronger and stronger, and still he could not overcome his urge to take the bills out of the box by force! And the bills were flying on and on… first they had different colors, but slowly they all became red… many of them were dripping with blood… on many of them the image of the demon Azazel was laughing… and this demon had long, sharp nails…*
> *And again the image of his father is visible from afar.*
> *"Take my son, take!" The image calls to him, "take… collect!"*
> *But how terrible is his father! His shrouds are half torn and worn out… underneath the slits the rotten man's flesh is peaking out… in between the parts of flesh his pale-as-lime bones are seen… around the corpse worms and snakes are tangled, which are eating it with their many mouths…*
> *"Don't be afraid, my son, don't be afraid! Collect, collect!"*
> *"No! I shall not take!" Called Mr. Finkelman in a scary voice, and he dropped down to the ground and fainted…*[481]

After he wakes up, he realizes that his wife has died and so the story ends. It seems from this last passage that Finkelman does achieve some understanding: he refuses to take the money as his father's spirit encourages him to do; instead he chose his wife's love. Unfortunately, he made this choice too late. Becoming self-consciousness of the disadvantages of privilege is thus reflected in Finkelman's recognition that his authentic feelings of love towards his wife are being systematically crushed by a social-economic system that sanctifies the pursuit of narrow self-interests, and which values the accumulation of wealth above all other social ideals.

Peretz would move on from this story to experiment with the possibility of writing radical literature in Hebrew, similar to his attempts in Yiddish with the *Yontef bletlekh*. In 1896 he

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[481]Perets, "A Night of Horror: A Research in Mental Disease," 146; or Kol kitvey, resh"kaf-hey.

published several short stories in Hebrew as well as in Yiddish. The stories "*Ha-isha Marat Khana*" ("The Wife Mrs. Hanna") in Hebrew and the Yiddish story "*Khasene gehat: detseylt fun a froy"* ("Married: As Told By A Woman") were both discussed in the previous chapter. The latter story presented a new figure in Yiddish literature: the character of the Yiddish nationalist; the type of the national-*inteligent* Peretz was striving for – close to the common people and to their language (speaks Yiddish, sings Yiddish songs), yet worldly in his view and educated. In a humorous Hebrew story published at the same year by the name of "*Tmunot me-olam ha-tohu*" (translated into English as "Scenes From Limbo"[482]), Peretz portrayed the negative mirror image of the "organic intellectual".

"*Tmunot*" is the Hebrew parallel for the Yiddish "*Bilder*", and indeed Peretz created in this story a series of dramatic scenes\images, set in a provincial shtetl similar to "*Bilder fun a provints rayze*", but he alternated the reportage style for a more dramatic one, eliminating the "Peretzian" writer protagonist in favor of a mini-panoramic view of the town. Here you can see the influence of Abramovitsh's Hebrew work on Peretz, though Peretz's is a more dramatic style – It almost seems even that this text was an early attempt by Peretz to write a drama, an achievement which he would only accomplish during the following decade.

The negative mirror image of the "organic intellectual" portrayed in "Married" embodies itself in several characters who are modernizing\modernized to various degrees. First and fore-most there is the character of the 24yr old rabbi's son ("the rabbi's son" is the only way he is referred to in the story; his father is a government appointed Rabbi to the shtetl,

[482]Originally it was published (as was "The Wife Mrs. Hanna") in *Ha-tzfira*, [Hazefirah], Warsaw, no. 17, 18, 24, 27, 35, 56 January-February-March 1896. Robert Alter translated the story into English and included it in his anthology, see Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 41-64. Alter translated the version that appeared in Peretz's various editions of Collected Hebrew Works since 1899 (he used Dvir, 1951); it has minor variations from the original *Ha-tzfira* publication. I translated from the latter. I couldn't find a Yiddish parallel to this story.

meaning a reformist rabbi, not one from the orthodox rabbinic establishment), who lives in Warsaw and appears modern by his dress and his lack of facial hair. There is some fear by people in the shtetl that the rabbi's son would turn and corrupt things in the small town, be he has actually come for business. He closes a deal with a man called Rafael to marry his daughter for a sum of money based on her looks and her taste in clothes. The father and the designated son-in-law also fabricate an interview-scene for the sake of the "*mesakelet*" (modernizing) daughter, to make it seem as if she has a say in this process, and it is up to her to choose her romantic partner. An enthusiastic reader of Schiller's poetry ("he is the comfort of my life, and the only unique pleasure…"), the daughter's exchange with the rabbi's son seems like a series of romantic cliché's (he speaks to her in poetry), while the comedic theatrical element is intensified by the fact the her parents are ears dropping behind the door during which.

When the rabbi's son tries to lure her to come with him to Warsaw and leave this town of "backward savages", than the father barges in claiming he did not agree to this and thus revealing the pre-arranged deal to the daughter. The deal was almost off (the rabbi's son had to tell the father he said what he said only for the sake of the interview), but the daughter, who felt betrayed at first, nevertheless decided at the end she wants to marry him.

In this mini-farcical sketch, somewhat reminiscent of the first part of "In a Summer House", Peretz mocks the supposedly social progressions of the Haskalah, which the critique of arranged marriages was one of its major focuses in its literature. The way the *maskil* (the proponent of the Haskalah) is introduced is highly ironic:

> *And the son of the rabbi… despite what his former teacher said about him, doesn't have pretty eyes, but rather dim and tired eyes; he is twenty four years of age, and already his cheeks lost their youthfulness, and he had a small bald spot on his head. But – he is also not as ugly as Mikhaelko*

imagined him to be, or as the matchmaker in the study-house told in Mikhaelko's name. Maybe his eyes are tired and dim out of working too hard, and his forehead was trespassing on his scalp out of thinking too much, – who knows? But when he comes dressed in a suit and a necktie, to be seen and to see the daughter of Refael form Kotsk, he was elegantly dressed, and so he was in her eyes… (Ha-tzfira, no. 35, 1896).

Peretz shows here that not only the Haskalah-reforms were not achieved, but that the true face of the maskil is rather pale and his appearance and actions make him to be not that sophisticated either. His "threat" to change the norms in traditional Jewish society (a long segment is devoted in the story for the town's people discussing his arrival out of anticipation and fear) doesn't hold much teeth according to the story. He doesn't have any social progressive plan, besides arranging for himself a comfortable material status through marriage, acting as nothing more than as a greedy bourgeois. His greediness is further told through his father, who tells the clockmaker that the only reason his son came into town was to collect his mother's inheritance, not caring to ask about her illness; that he sent a soapy poem called "Love of Zion" to the Baron de Rothschild, the financier of the early Jewish colonists in Palestine, and a romantic poem to another maiden; and when asked if he liked the daughter of Refael he raised 6 fingers to show the 6 thousand that he received as endowment for the *shidekh*.

The progressive Jewish bourgeois figure of past generations, so potent in Haskalah literature, has now becomes degenerated and the beholder of reaction, just like the transformation of the European bourgeois-class itself during the latter part of the 19th century.

Amongst the other semi-modern figures, striving to hop on the "Haskalah wagon in the town of Limbo", who Peretz parodies in this story, is Mikhael the Hebrew Zionist poet. Mikhail writes about "all four seasons and about the Jewish people and its redemption", and vehemently rejects the plan to settle Jews in Argentina. There is also Gavriel who attacks

Jewish education (another maskilic cliché), to some extent a self-parody by Peretz, the writer of "*Bildung*"; and Shmuel the blond who aspires to become a Hebrew prose writer. Peretz surveys here an array of tired, worn out, and ridicules figures. The ridiculed shtetl-maskil from "*Bilder fun a provints rayze*" (chapter 6 there), has now become a *chovev tsion*, a proto-Zionist, who sings irrelevant lyric using his elite Yeshiva education, reserved only for males.[483] Jewish women did not improve their status with these new ideologies – the Haskalah and proto-Zionism. Both movements are depicted in the story as failed forms of Jewish modernization (interesting that this story was serially published during the same time as the first publication of Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*).

While Jewish socialism is not explicitly presented in the story as an alternative, that is still Peretz's point of departure, looking from a distance at these "failed" others. Explicitly in the text, those who "look" at the maskilim and who get the last word are eccentric figures in the town – the government appointed rabbi (who "only seldom leaves his doorstep") and the clockmaker (who lives alone for years, never telling why). They moan the education they gave their sons – a Haskalah package of natural sciences, geography, music and Hebrew and Jewish education – "but the heart, the moral, the pillars of man – we all forgot… yes, we are the guilty ones". This lament at the end of the story is reminiscent of the way the Enlightenment project was criticized decades later by Adorno and Horkheimer for failing to properly consider questions of morality; something we will encounter in Perez's Hasidic

[483]Abramovitsh, who devoted periods in his life to writing in Hebrew and other periods to writing in Yiddish (becoming a pioneer in the latter), had to overcome the pressures from the conservative Hebrew-*maskilim* after he transitioned in the 1860's to writing in Yiddish. Abramovitsh wrote about them sarcastically:"our writers, those grammarians who said: let us strengthen our language, the holy tongue; what have we in common with the common people?" (Quoted in Miron**,** *A Traveler Disguised*: *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, 19).

stories, and his use of the radical-conservative eye.[484] By ending with these two characters the following statements are made: the clockmaker, a character who appreciates the concept time, with his concern for the old watchtower, is the one who ill-satisfied with the existing models of progress. The good-intentioned government appointed rabbi represents the failure of the integrationist model of the Haskalah both by the way he is ostracized in Jewish society and by his failure with his son. The rabbi is too old himself to join the ranks of Jewish Socialism, but the yearning for more morality in the maskilic educational model represent some primal sentiment in favor of social justice; and his mode of operation is in some way another form of favoring *doikayt* (repairing society where it resides) over Zionism. As opposed to the rabbi's biological son (and in this light one can see the irony of referring to him only as "the rabbi's son"), the reformist's rabbi spiritual son would be Jewish socialism.

The story "Scenes From Limbo" signify a poetic and ideological departure from past and present Hebrew literature. Stylistically and thematically, Peretz in this story not only does not follow the demands of the New Wave (he does so when he favors ironic humor and farce over openly confronting the harsh socio-economic reality of lower class Jews), but he also doesn't need to directly reject them as he did in "In a Summer House" (using neo-romantic impressionist literature); in any case his Hebrew is non-referential.

Ideologically, Peretz rejects here both the past Hebrew literature of the Haskalah, and of one of its predecessors, which is Hebrew proto-Zionist literature, for its empty admiration for the Land of Israel, and its co-operation with the Jewish magnates to fulfill its mission. Though this is not Peretz's last literary text which was originally written in Hebrew, one can see in "Scenes From Limbo" how on the ideological level Peretz would soon not be able to find his

[484]See chapter 5.

proper place in Hebrew literature (hence the lack of presenting an explicit ideological alternative as he did in "Married"). The voice he was directing at, that of the non-maskilic non-Zionist Jewish socialist and *folkist* voice, he was able to find more and more only in Yiddish.

Coda

While Peretz never reached the same stature in Hebrew as he did in Yiddish, he did play a role in the modernization of Hebrew literature; more than Yiddish critics typically acknowledge. "Peretz's Hebrew writings", wrote Shmuel Verses in the mid 1960's, "remained inaccessible to Yiddish readers, for there is no trace of them in his Yiddish "Collected Works."[485] Of course today, when Peretz is read less and less in the original, Peretz's Hebrew work in translation should be as accessible to readers of English as his primary Yiddish content in translation.

Until recently, many Hebrew critics tended to play down the radical and non-Zionist Peretz, and failed to give enough credit to Peretz's attempts to introduce a radical mindset into Hebrew literature. Such omissions failed to include sufficient explanations of the context of Peretz's publications and creations and their relation to his efforts in Yiddish from the same period. The Hebrew critic who first acknowledged Peretz's unique contribution to Hebrew Literature was Gershon Shaked, who in the late 1970's wrote: "Peretz's stories mark an important evolution of Hebrew literature because of their clear socialist sympathies."[486] And while it is true that Peretz wrote less and less in Hebrew in the 20th century period of his life,

[485]Werses, *Sipur ve-shorsho*, p. 119.

[486]Gershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction*, trans. Yael Lotan, ed. Emily Miller Budick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 27.

his stature should always be examined in terms of being an important bi-lingual Hebrew and Yiddish writer.

This chapter only focused on Peretz's Hebrew prose. The next chapter will critically examine Peretz's poetry of the 1890's – both in Hebrew and in Yiddish – and its relation to the inspiration he received from the radical political currents of the period.

Appendix

This passage is taken from the Yiddish Feuilleton "Literature and Life", in which Peretz criticizes Zionist literature for depicting the Land of Israel in very rosy non-realist manner:[487]

> *Mainly what is comical is that this new literary testament brought us Ben-Avigdor! (…) It is funny that amongst all the eggs that Ben-Avigdor laid so far, there was not one realistic egg and there will be none, because Ben-Avigdor is by his very nature a dreamy idyllist, a pure-national Zionist[488]… (…) Actually he is, as far as I know him, an honest man!... and here is the true irony, in that poor Ben-Avigdor created a hurdle for himself, over which he constantly stumbles!*
> *"Write from life!" (…) "Photograph, study your life, what is around you, and don't let yourself dream"… (…)*
> *He does not in fact act, for example, according to the financial principals of the Choveve Zion, according to news from the Jewish colonies in Palestine, according to the description of their situation… the "literature" part succeeds the best from afar! And in addition it must idealize and be upbeat!*
> *Furthermore – as much as the writer is far from that place, all the more better!*
> *It is written well from Odessa, better – from Warsaw, very well – from Dinaburg[489], extremely well from Eyshishok[490], and the very best would have been to describe the Land of Israel from the other*

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[487]Only years later, would a similar criticism be expressed by Y.H. Brenner, who was at times close to the ideology of the Bund and to Yiddishism. Brenner acted in the spirit of Peretz's advice that one should know the land if you want to write about it, and he lived in the Land of Israel itself and wrote from there. The New Wave literature tended to focus more on the 'economic dramas' of Jews living in Eastern Europe, and less about the fulfillment of Zionism per se in the Land of Israel. Of course this does not indicate that it was not Zionist.

[488]Peretz uses here in Yiddish the term "*palestinyents*" ("has a Palestinian tendency") rather than "Zionist".

[489]Daugavpils (Dinaburg in Yiddish): A town in Latvia. 50% Jewish throughout the nineteenth century and up to World War I, many of which joined the Lovers of Zion movement. At the same time, Dvinsk's branch of the

*edge of the earth, or from behind the "mountains of darkness"! ...; From afar it's hard to notice that the investment is "the entire Jewish People's" besides Rothschild, and the entire inventory is Rothschild's besides the Jewish people… from afar also the iron cashbox of the Choveve Zion doesn't make a bad impression; in any case, it's impossible to notice any crack, any tiny hole, to stick in the boniest finger… from afar people don't even see who is crying "*Мы пахали"[491]*, the ox himself, or the flies between his horns, and mainly every broker with the colonies – from afar an enthusiastic patriot, the kind hearted Turk, the Arab – a benign creature, and all our colonists are heroes are the Maccabeus at least, and before you know it again the stunt with the oil will take place!*

But when you come closer – Heaven protect us; all your senses deceive you! The cashbox, it seems to be made "mayse reshes", meaning a net with big eyes, and the "ones who handle the public's needs" have the same fingers as all people! You don't suspect anybody, God forbid, but yet you feel funny, and sometimes it starts to deceive your eyes so, that from "mayse reshes" becomes suddenly a spider web, and you hallucinate: a few big spiders and entire crowds of little Jews in the shape of poor sucked up creatures… little dead flies… you tear yourself away from the cashbox and consider the great patriot, the colonists-broker, the chief advisor, and you have further mistaken, and you could have sworn, that this is Yossi Rivlin's[492] own brother!

The Turk also losses his charm; he smacks your soles with bamboo your soles and sucks your blood from your vessels with his "baksheesh" ... the Arab, the benign creature, seems to you, heaven forbid, as a dangerous murderous thief, and our Maccabeus-, as if they would have hide under the beds!

But how does realism connect to the Choveve Zion in Palestine? Such a pair can only be born in Menahem the Writer's[493] sick head… Palestine is Palestine and realism is only in novellas…

(Literature And Life, 174-178; or Ale Verk, vol 7, 76-80)

Bund was one of the larger in the movement. (Zalkin, Mordechai. 2010. Daugavpils. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Daugavpils (accessed June 24, 2013)).

[490]Eišiškės (*Eyshishok* in Yiddish): a remote town on the Lithuanian-Belarusian boarder. It had a Jewish majority since the mid 18th century and was a center for *misnagdim*. More relevant to Peretz, it was also a center of Zionism since its founding.

[491]From Russian:"we plowed".

[492]Yosef Rivlin (1837-1896) was the head of the ultra-orthodox community in Jerusalem at the time. The heads of Choveve Tsiyon were angry with him because he tried to hurt Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (known as the revivalist of Modern Hebrew) by turning him to the Turks using false accusations (See also: Goldberg, "On Y.-L. Perets' Relationship to Zionism," 80, N15).

[493]Peretz is referring here to Ben-Avigdor. "Menahem the Writer" (*"Menakhem Ha-sofer"*) is the title of Ben-Avigdor's pamphlet story in favor of the New Wave in Hebrew literature, published in 1893.

Chapter 4: On Love and Class-War: Peretz's 1890's Hebrew and Yiddish Poetry

Introduction: The Socialist Prophet

In 1894, at the very height of Peretz's radical period, he published a small collection of Hebrew love poems entitled *Ha'ugav* (The Organ).[494] The poems were short, compact, and personal and they dealt overwhelmingly with the relationships between a *he* and a *she*. Or to be more precise, all of the poems expressed the longing of a 'he' for a lost, idealized, 'she'. To many, this collection seemed to echo the lyrical style of the great German poet Henrich Heine in his *Buch der Lieder*. The collection received great critical acclaim when it came out. Yosef Klausner, a literary critic, who would later become a leading figure in Hebrew literary criticism, hailed it for its innovative deployment of sensual lyricism in Hebrew, and in general for bringing new styles into Hebrew poetry. Klausner especially noted the personal "subjective poetry" which, he claimed, the readers of Hebrew literature were looking forward to.[495] Klausner was exaggerating, because sensual and erotic lyricism was already to be found in Hebrew as early as the first half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the fact that these poems stirred up a debate regarding the possibility of writing Hebrew romantic-love poetry, means that Peretz did in some way challenge the commonly held understandings of Hebrew poetry at the time.

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[494]Isaac Leib Peretz, ha-'Ugav*: shire ahavah I me'et Y.L. Perets* (Varsha: Hotsa'at Sh. B. Shvartsberg, 1894).

[495]Klausner, Joseph, "Zion li-Meshorer, 2d ed., 1894. Shire Ahabah," in *Ha-Eshkol*, i, pp. 54-71.

This type of personal love poetry carried the risk, in the eyes of some social activists, of appearing as counterproductive in socialist terms, and of alienating the majority of readers. There were critics who advocated that what literature urgently needed were portrayals of class-struggle; that a writer should focus on this subject if he wanted to help the working-class. Such claims ignored obvious facts such as Marx and Engels deep affection for the lyrical style of Heine, and that the young Marx himself wrote Heine-inspired love poetry.[496]

David Pinski, Peretz's young colleague and co-editor of the *Bletlekh*, wrote about how Peretz responded to such claims when speaking to a crowd of workers activists in the mid 1890's. These activists belonged to the Polish Socialist Party, or to different Jewish labor groups. They argued that if he wishes to help the working-class, a writer should focus on literary portrayals of class-struggle. "This is what he has to write and the way he has to talk. The worker also understands a hint, but the hint should be aimed at what the worker understands."[497] Such rhetoric reflects a deep misunderstanding of Marx's view of the class-struggle as "The history of all hitherto existing society"[498] in relation to questions of esthetics. The Marxist reader needs to look for how the perception of love is determined by the social-economic base. He needs to examine whether the concept of love is represented in the work as an abstract bourgeois ideal or as a genuine emotion. In this regard, Peretz's Hebrew story "In a Summer House" that was discussed in the previous chapter, addressed this very theme of the different meanings of love among people of different social classes.

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[496]See Margaret A . Rose, Reading the Young Marx and Engels*: Poetry, Parody, and the Censor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 21, 24. And Love Poems of Karl Marx, edited and translated by Reinhard Lettau and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (San-Fransicso: City Lights Books, 1977).

[497]Pinski, "Dray yor mit Y.L. Perets," 23.

[498]K. Marx & F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 2.

Peretz responded to these populist arguments by saying that even in principle he could not bend to such programmatic demands from a writer. Around the same time that Peretz wrote stories like "Bontshe the Silent", and addressed the workers-activists at the meeting, he wrote a *romancero*-poem (a love ballad). The class-struggle, Peretz said, was for him only one single issue among a whole world of others. According to Peretz, what one should demand from a writer is justice, compassion, and morality. In those three foundations, lie the writer's potential to find the truth.[499]

Meeting social-activists certainly stimulated Peretz to be even more socially militant on the pages in Yiddish of the *Yontef bletlekh* and elsewhere, including the creation of edgy Yiddish poetry, as we shall see in this chapter. In the previous chapter, Peretz's sole radical Hebrew publication *The Arrow* was discussed, mainly in regard to its works of fiction and essays. But in *The Arrow*, one can also find the following Hebrew poem:

> *In vain, my Lord, you came down from the heavens to Mount Sinai*
> *With the fire of your law;*
> *For nothing you voiced with thunder and lightning*
> *Your teaching, your Torah.*
>
> *If in the heart of man you planted exploitation,*
> *The root of poverty,*
> *And the golden calves which would divide the kingdom*
> *Between Moloch and Chemosh!*
>
> *To the depths of a person's heart, send from your teaching*
> *At least beam of light!*
> *Without thunder and lightning on Sinai, in secret*
> *Bury the evil!*[500]

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[499]Pinski, "Dray yor mit Y.L. Perets," 23-24.

[500]Perets, *Kol kitbey*, taf-tsadek-vav. All poetry translations from Yiddish and Hebrew are done by Adi Mahalel.

Here we read a prophet-speaker addressing the biblical God, accusing his "Lord" of creating evil, meaning exploitation, "The root of poverty". The poem shifts between the personal ("my lord", "your torah", "depths of a person's heart") and the social ("Mount Sinai", "poverty", "exploitation") experiences. Looking into the "depths of a person's heart" is how Peretz, even while demanding to put an end to social ills such as poverty and exploitation, invents the individual. In political terms, this poem does not speak from a conscious class perspective, but rather from the point of view of an individual prophet's- asking *his God* to work to achieve this goal of social justice. It can be compared also with Peretz's Yiddish poem from the same year "Dos gebet" in which the poetic speaker addresses God informally, asking him to take responsibility for the unjust world he has created. There he writes:

> *When will you, Master of the Universe,*
> *Cover the deep pit,*
> *Which divides your children*
> *Between strong and weak,*
> *Between lambs and oppressors?*[501]

The call for a *deus ex machina* to fix society's problems, meaning starting with the elimination of the oppressive class system, is, of course, in no way an articulate political program. But nor is it a simple love poem. These harangue poems against God Almighty employ the literary device of the poet-prophet as Peretz envisioned the true poet, as opposed to a mere rhetorician he viewed many of the Hebrew Haskalah poets to be.[502] According to Shmeruk, who relies on Victor Erlich's scholarship about the prophet-figure in Slavic literature (Russian and Polish), Peretz's pseudoprophetic poems indeed follow the

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[501]"The Prayer", 1894, *Homentash*; and Ale verk, vol 1, 150-151.

[502]See Peretz's essay in Hebrew on the maskilic poet Yehuda Leyb Gordon: "What Was Gordon — A Philologist or a Poet?," (Ma haya Gordon — balshan o meshorer?) in *Kol kitvey I. L. Peretz*, vol. 10, bk. 1 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, I960), 161-200. This long article was originally published in *Ha-tzfira* in 1896.

conventions of the time in Slavic literature. In 1892, in his Yiddish poetry book *Poezye*, Peretz published several translations of poems by a Russian poet of Jewish descent, S"I Nadson (1862-1887), including a pseudo-prophetic poem.[503]

Peretz's longing for prophecy is written in a language that aspires to emulate that of the Biblical prophets,[504] one can find this sense of longing in the poem "The Date Palm" from "The Organ", and, as we saw, in his Yiddish poems as well (following a long tradition of Yiddish translations of the Hebrew Bible).[505]

By evoking a traditional, authoritative voice as his vehicle for communicating radical social ideas to his traditional readership, Peretz seeks to bestow on his message – and, by extension, on socialism as a secular movement in general – a theological authority. In other words, he wants to make the case that capitalism is fundamentally opposed to God's will (law).

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[503]Nadelson's poem poem translated into English reads:

> *Come now, come, oh prophet! With all our strength\ Of sorrow and of love we call upon you!\ Look how weak we are, tired and limp,\ How strong is the enemy, how helpless are we.*
> *This is the last hour; oh, save us from disgrace,\ Drowsy is our consciousness by now, the night is without any ray of light;\ Drowsy is our shame by now, astray is our understanding,\ And the mediocrity preaches everywhere!*

See: Chone Shmeruk**,** "Harkeriyah lenavi: Schneour, Bialik, Perez veNadson," ("Call to the Prophet in Shne'ur, Bialik, Peretz, and Nadson") *Hasifrut* 2 (1969), 241-244**.** And Victor Erlich, *The Double Image: Concepts of the Poet in Slavic Literatures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964). The poem is taken from: Y.L. Perets, *Poezye* (Warsaw, 1892), 27), quoted in: Shmeruk, "*Hqeri'ah lanavi* ," 281.

[504]We saw in the previous chapter that Vintshevski was the one who pioneered poetry the genre of prophetic poems in Hebrew with his socialist poem "*Masa duma*". To strengthen its "biblical originality" "*Masa duma*" even included at the bottom of its page a note from the publisher:"Because this affair relates to the ancient past, and it is not known who of the Hebrew prophets has said", he is asking those with the proper knowledge of ancient Hebrew books to look for its source. Vintshevski's Hebrew socialist prophetic poem was also a response to Yalag (Vintshevski, *Gezamelte verk* 9, 317-319).

[505]See also Peretz's series of poetic adaptations of the Biblical prophets in Yiddish: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and more. This approach is not unlike his use of the Hasidic world in his stories.

In Hebrew Zionist poetry, Bialik is considered to be the greatest example of the prophetic poet.[506] Bialik employed a prophetic-speaker in his famous poem "In The City Of Slaughter" (1903-4; which Peretz translated into Yiddish under the title "*Mase Nemirov*"[507]). Hannan Hever shows how Bialik used the authoritative "truthful and just" voice of the prophet in order to attack the "weak Jews" (victims of the pogrom who didn't fight back enough, according to Bialik), thus combating the enemies of Zionism within the Jewish people. While Bialik's poem can be seen as a secular rebellion against God, Hever shows how past scholarship neglected the role of the poem in establishing a national theology. Bialik's prophet-persona as well as Ahad-Ha'am's articles which influenced Bialik (see as "A Priest and a Prophet", also published in 1894 like "The Organ"), wished to give the ultimate authority to Zionism. In their voices, the establishment of a Jewish national-imagined community represents the holiest goal of the Jewish people.[508]

Figurative biblical speech was also used by the Russian poet Pushkin in his influential poem *The Prophet* (1826), but his manner was different from Peretz. Unlike Pushkin and Bialik in "In The City Of Slaughter", Peretz does not quote God speaking to his prophet. Gods' silence in Peretz's prophetic poetry gives it is a more secular quality than Pushkin and Bialik's work. Despite Peretz's evocation of "God's law", by omitting God's words, he strengthens the notion of God's existence as a mere metaphor. While it is true that romantic poets tended to

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[506]For a comprehensive study on the topic see Miron, H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry.

[507]According to Miron, Bialik's first "prophecy"-poem was actually his long poem in Yiddish "Dos letste vort" (The Last Word, 1901), whose main theme is the story of a prophet's mission that ends in utter failure. See Dan Miron, "Mi'be'ir Ha'hariga va'hal'ah," in Michael Gluzman, Hannan Hever and Dan Miron, *Be-ir ha-haregah: bikur me'uchar bi-melot me'ah shanah la-po'emah shel Bialik* (Hebrew) [In the city of slaughter: a late visit on the hundreth anniversary of Bialik's poema] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 88-97.

[508]See Hannan Hever, "The Victims of Zionism: On "In the City of Slaughter" by H"N Bialik," in *Be-ir ha-haregah: bikur me'uchar bi-melot me'ah shanah la-po'emah shel Bialik*, 37-70.

humanize God, and that Bialik's God resided mainly within his own psyche and was not a transcendental being,[509] Peretz's poetry is more firmly secular. As opposed to Bialik and Ahad-Ha'am's subordination of the universal to the service of the Jewish nation,[510] Peretz successfully constructed the moral-universal ideal of the prophet — as a representative of universal social justice. This assessment applies equally to Peretz's "nationalist" Yiddish poems that were published in the *Bletlekh*, taken in the particular context in which they were written, as will be discussed in this chapter.

One of Peretz's most powerful poems, the Yiddish "Meyn nisht" (1906), also uses a prophetic voice to call for a radical progressive social-change, as we will see later in this chapter. There are only a few examples - the poem from *The Arrow* stands out as one of poems by Peretz in Hebrew that call for social justice. Radical political poems by Peretz are more readily available in Yiddish as we have seen in previous chapters regarding his overall body of work.

In Hebrew, Peretz's critical contributions to the literature are focused less on the radical, social concerns which he expressed in Yiddish. Instead, his Hebrew writings are notable for the ways in which they helped drive the modernization of the compositional and stylistic elements of the art form. In this respect, many contemporary readers consider his book of poetry, "The Organ" to be one of the first true modernist works in Hebrew literature, a view which we will further examined in this chapter.

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[509]See Miron, *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 12-13.

[510]Hever, "The Victims of Zionism: On "In the City of Slaughter" by H"N Bialik," 47-54.

Writing Hebrew Poetry

Early Years as a Poet

During the 1870's and 1880's Peretz was mostly known in the literary scene as a Hebrew poet. During these early years, he also wrote a few poems in Polish. Many of these were translations from German of poems by Goethe, and most of them are erotic in nature, but they were never published.[511] In Hebrew, he wrote some medium-length and long Hebrew narrative poetry, generally following the pre-modernist structural conventions of European poetry. His first big attempt at writing Hebrew poetry is the long narrative poem "Life of a Hebrew Poet" ("*Khayey meshorer ivri*", 1877), which he allegedly co-wrote with his father-in-law Gabriel Judah Lichtenfeld (1811-1877), but in fact Peretz was the sole writer."Life of a Hebrew Poet" was published as part of a poem collection entitled "Stories in Verses" (*Sipurim beshir veshirim shonim*), and the poem itself is an unfinished rhymed novel, which is divided into 10 chapters.[512]

"Life of a Hebrew Poet" is one of the most salient examples out of a series of similar attempts in Hebrew poetry of the time of incorporating structures borrowed from the novel. This incorporation was the way poetry responded and tried to compete with the prose genre and with the rise of the Hebrew novel in particular. "Life of a Hebrew Poet" is Peretz's attempt to take on the prose-structured narrative poems created by the greatest Hebrew poet of the 19th century Y. L. Gordon (Yalag), whose poem "The Tip of a Yud" is considered to be its

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[511]See N., Weynig, "Poylishe lider fun Y. L. Perez fun yor 1874," (Yiddish) *Yivo-Bleter* 12 (1937), 191-204.

[512]About Peretz's relationship to Lichtenfeld and their collection of poems together, see Menashe Vakser, "Dos lebn fun a yidishn dikhter," *YIVO-Bleter* 12 (1937): 205-60.

pioneering effort. Bar-El shows that in comparison to Yalag, "Life of a Hebrew Poet" encompassed a broad novel structure as opposed to the more focused plot-development in Yalag; and unsurprisingly, Peretz's was much longer (close to 12,000 lines!) than Yalag's.[513]

In "Life of a Hebrew Poet" Peretz dealt with themes he will later explored in depth, such as the status of women in Jewish society, the Jewish bourgeois, socialism, sibling rivalries, poetic norms, and others.[514] One of the interesting ways these themes come into play, is when one of the poem's protagonists, named Daniel, who used to equally believe in traditional Jewish piety and in the financial market, loses his fortune in the stock-market in the big capitalist crisis of 1873. This crisis became known as the "Panic of 1873", or in the poem as "*krakh*", following the German *Gründerkrach*.

The economic crisis of 1873 brought in a wave of economic anti-Semitism, which particularly affected the Jews who had migrated to Germany from Russian-occupied Poland.[515] Peretz reacts to this crisis by voicing a rising nationalist sentiment. He does so by contrasting the character of Daniel to two characters who supposedly devote their lives to "the people". First, to his brother Reuven, who chose a different life, being both an artisan and a modern educator who founded modern Jewish schools. Thus Reuven embodied the agenda of the Haskalah: Jewish productivization and acquirement of worldly knowledge –

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[513]Judith Bar-El, The Hebrew Long Poem *from its Emergence to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: A Study of the History of a Genre* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), pp. 118-119. See also: Hillel Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef:* shirat *ḥibat tziyon* (A History of Hebrew poetry, volume 1: The Ḥibat Tziyon period) (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poʿalim, 1987), 252-254. Regarding Peretz's translation to Yiddish of "The Tip of a Yud" see second chapter. The discussion over poetic norms was the central theme of "*Nagniel*" another one of Peretz's narrative poetry of the time (1876).

[514]Bar-El, The Hebrew Long Poem *from its Emergence to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, 119.

[515]Felicity Rash, *German Images of the Self and the Other: Nationalist, Colonialist, and Anti-Semitic Discourse, 1871-1918* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 44.

(with emphasis on learning languages). And second, Daniel is contrasted to the poverty stricken young Hebrew poet Yaakov (also one of the names for the Jewish people), who fled to the big city Warsaw earlier in his life, and who Daniel's daughter Sarah falls in love with. Yaakov had fallen ill due to the meager conditions he was living in, and Sarah was now taking care of him. These lines are taken from the beginning of the fifth chapter:

> *Why are the roads of Vienna in mourning, and its street trembling? (...)*
> *Because the stock-market fell in the big storm,*
> *From its foundation to its roof it crumbled,*
> *The temple of the businessmen has fallen; its priests became miserable (...)*
> *It has fallen, the stock-market has fallen (...)*
> *Canaanites in the rest of the lands, who trade with stocks,*
> *Their fortune was lost,*
> *Amongst them also R' Daniel –*
> *Months have passed, and Yaakov rose up from his bed...*[516]

We see how the rise of nationalism (the rise of Yaakov, i.e. the Jewish People) is directly bound in this poem with the capitalist crisis, in a direct cause and effect relationship. Meanwhile, the issue of anti-Semitism, as a result of the crisis, comes only in an implicit manner if any. This subtle treatment of anti-Semitism is not the case with Peret'zs narrative poem, also published in 1877, entitled "*Kidush ha-shem*" ("Sanctification of the Name of God", 1877) that deals with the persecution of Jews as its main theme. "Sanctification of the Name of God" innovated by introducing the martyrlogical theme into the Eastern European Jewish landscape (the plot takes place during the Khmelnytsky period, i.e. mid 17th century). Peretz's poem directly corresponds with Yalag's poem "*Bimtsulot yam*" ("Depths of the Sea", 1868), which deals with the martyrlogical theme, but takes place in medieval Spain. Peretz's poem is shorter than Yalag's (75 lines as opposed to over 150), and it focuses exclusively on

[516]I.L. Peretz & Gabriel Judah Lichtenfeld, *Sippurim be-shir ve-shirim shonim me'et Shenei Ba'alei Asufot* (Hebrew) ("Stories in Verse and Sundry Poems From Two Anthologists") (Warsaw: 1877), 51-52.

the dramatic development of the plot (Yalag's poem contains a long contemplative introduction section, which was a maskilic convention). In both poems, a Jewish young female protagonist refuses the courting of a non-Jewish military leader. In each case, the Jewish heroine ultimately chooses to take her own life, rather than submit to a man who devastated her people.

In Yalag's "Depths of the Sea", the personal sacrifice narrative receives a unique agnostic interpretation. There, after the protagonist already saved her people from being sold off as slaves, she decides to take her own life out of "sanctification of her honor" and not sanctification of God.[517] In "Sanctification of the Name of God", as its title suggests, Peretz actually returns to the more conventional religious-nationalist interpretation that dominated before Yalag. The protagonist utters in a prayer to the heavens: "Forgive me God for I shall take my own life,\ I shall not give myself to the enemy – who butchered my parents."[518] Here Peretz partially shared the early nationalist spirit of the very first incarnations of the Lovers of Zion movements, which began to rise in Eastern Europe as early as the 1870's.

A solid example of a pre-1890's Hebrew poem which conveys a radical message is the poem "*Li omrim*" ("I Am Told", 1876), which Peretz considered it to be his first poem (though more in terms of its significance than his actual first that came out a 1-2 prior). It stands out as not being a narrative poem, and as being short in length, and it is more optimistic than some of Peretz's other poems of the period. It features this stanza:

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[517]See Bar-El, The Hebrew Long Poem *from its Emergence to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, 88-96. And Dan Miron, "Bein takdim le-mikreh — shirato ha-'epit shel Y"L Gordon u-mekomah be- sifrut ha-haskalah ha-civrit," ("Between Precedent and Happening: Y. L. Gordon's Epic Poetry and Its Place in Hebrew Haskalah Literature") (Hebrew) *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 2 (1983), pp. 127-97.

[518]Perets, *Kol kitbey*, taf-ayin-zayin.

I am told, the masses will be oppressed forever
From privilege and money as in ancient times;
Forever there will be masters and slaves,
And dictators will crush nations with their steps—(Perets, Kol kitbey, taf-ayin-khet).

Rozentsvayg correctly views this poem as being influenced by socialist ideas connected with ideas of national liberation.[519] It is interesting to observe how this poem, with all its pathos and Biblical-prophetic Hebrew, still has in its title and as an anaphoric base a phrase that was influenced by everyday Yiddish. "*Hoben zey gezogt*" ("so they said") is used in Yiddish to dismiss an opinion which came from a third party, not part of the conversation at hand. The Hebrew "*Li omrim*", is a present tense version of the Yiddish expression, and it functions exactly in the same way in this poem.[520]

Peretz's 1880's Hebrew poetry presented new features in the Hebrew narrative poem, particularly in its shorter lines, and in its choppier, edgier rhythm as compared to Yalag's poems. This rhythm would later appear in Peretz's prose work, signified by its short lines and the frequent usage of ellipsis. His poetry then employed some features of a lyrical cycle which was a structural and thematic innovation in Hebrew poetry at the time. The cycle-structure made it possible for Peretz to write *ars-poetica*, and to tell a story with changes in attitude, tone, and rhythm – lessons he surely learned from Heine.

There are two major representatives of the "cycles trend". The first is the rather nationalistic "*Manginot ha-zman*" ("The Melodies of the Time", 1887), which is characterized by its

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[519]See: Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 21.

[520]When a Yiddish translation of that old Hebrew poem was published in 1892-3 (uncertain whether it was done by Peretz himself or by somebody else), the anaphoric expression became "*Men zogt*" ("People say…"). See in Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 87-88; and also Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu*, volume 1, 261-263.

changing tone, rhyme-scheme, and rhythm throughout. "The Melodies of the Time" Peretz wrote in the years of disappointment with the liberal promise of emancipation for the Jews and the resulting rise of Jewish nationalism. And indeed the cycle focuses on a polemic with the Haskalah regarding the fate of the Jewish people, though for the most part it is done in the form of a rationalist-poetic debate in the spirit of Haskalah Hebrew poetry.[521] But as a precursor to his Yiddish narrative poem *Monish* that came out a year later (see further in the chapter), Peretz deviates from the strict rationalist mode, and moves into telling a legend. The poem's long 10th chapter tells the story of a witch who creates a monstrous figure: the Pharaoh who "did not know Joseph". She adds the last ingredients to the mix and:

"הוסיפו חשד בעל שבע עינים,
ערמת של שועל, ורשעת כל המן..."
ויצא פרעה מלך מצרים
בעטרת זהב ולבוש ארגמן.[522]
("Add a seven-eyed suspicion,
The cunning of a fox, and the wickedness of Haman"...
And out came Pharaoh king of Egypt
With a golden crown and purple cloth.)

The second half of the chapter is an adaptation of a midrash-legend (*Tanhuma*), about the Hebrew children buried by Pharaoh who rose from the earth when they heard Moses singing. This incorporation of legendary material, writes Miron, represents a more advanced stage in the development of the relation in Hebrew poetry to the supernatural legendary material.[523] The short 11th chapter supposedly expresses reservations from using the legendary "pearls",

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[521]Dan Miron, *Bo'ah, laylah: hasifrut ha'ivrit bein higayyon le'e-gayyon bemifneh hame'ah ha'esrim* (Come, Night: Hebrew Literature Between the Rational and Irrational at the Turn of the Twentieth Century) (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1987), 92.

[522]Perets, *Kol kitbey*, taf-pey.

[523]Miron, *Bo'ah, laylah: hasifrut ha'ivrit bein higayyon le'e-gayyon bemifneh hame'ah ha'esrim*, 92.

in favor of returning to the rationalist mode of debate.[524] But the poet uses a great deal of irony in this transition-chapter, which means the poetic-speaker doesn't simply surrender himself to the maskilic contempt towards legendary material. "I will seek knowledge; for knowledge is in fashion"[525] – , says the speaker, and the irony here in regard to "fashion" suggests that Peretz would continue to seek ways to challenge the literary conventions of his time, as he will indeed try.

"The Melodies of the Time" also includes an often quoted *ars-poetica* deviation, praising in short and clear Hebrew sentences the language of the common Jews: Yiddish. The poetic speaker asks his fellow Hebrew writers not to bear any grudge against him because he is fond of the "language of Berl and Shmerl", and prefers it over Hebrew. He writes with Irony, referring to Yiddish as the "language of the Hebrews": "Not the holy tongue,\ Not the Language of the prophets,\ But the language of the exiled,\ The language of the "Hebrews"!"[526]

The second major example of Peretz's 1880's Hebrew poetry is the long poem "*Ha-ir ha-ktana*" ("The Little Town", 1887), which is characterized by its short-lines (2-3 words) and its edgy-tempo throughout its 65 quadrilateral stanzas. In "The Little Town", one reads some conventional dismay about the hectic modern industrial city, alongside the attempt of a modern man to find some refuge in the pre-modern Jewish shtetl; thus presenting the supreme romantic antithesis between city and country. It reads:

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[524]Ibid, 92-93.

[525]Peretz, *Kol kitbey*, taf-pey-alef.

[526]See: ibid, taf-pey-gimel – taf-pey-daled. Barzel sees the presence of Yiddish as an underlying pattern in "Manginot Ha-zman", see: Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef*, 265.

Here the air is pure
From the smell of plague, free
From steam and vapor
And signs of fire.[527]

This passage serves as a preparation for an ironic antithesis, because unlike some of the 19th century European Romantic poetry, the poetic-speaker does not find refuge in country life or in nature. Instead, predating the alienated modern figure going back to the shtetl of his early 1890's Yiddish masterpiece "*Bilder fun a provints rayze*", there exists a fundamental failure of communication between the poet-speaker protagonist and the local Jews. The scene of his visit resembles literary or cinematic depictions of a modern westerner visiting a third world village:

I came out –
They surrounded me as bees,
For they mistook my outfit
And thought I was a lord.

They surrounded me as bees,
Pressed, pushed;
A circle of them around me,
Begged, yelled.

Ha, their voice
Tore up my heart!
-What will the lord sell,
What will the wealthy-man buy?[528]

Later in the poem there are descriptions of the modern westerner's encounter with the exotic eastern market place, with its various spices and perfumes. The Eastern European Jewish

[527]Peretz, *Kol kitvey*, taf-pey-vav.

[528]Ibid, taf-pey-tet.

shtetl could easily be replaced by a village in Palestine in mid-late 19th century French or English literature and one would hardly know the difference.[529] The depiction of the *shtetl* Jews as one loud and uncivilized crowd in the eyes of the modern Jew makes his attempt to convince that same crowd that they belong to the same imagined community pathetic and futile. This is why, unlike the Romantic poets who found refuge in nature, the poem seriously questions whether Jews posses such a place: "Is this the resting place\ For a troubled soul?,"[530] he asks.

The nationalist yearning is prominent in "The Little Town", especially through presenting the challenges. If the "The Melodies of the Time" dealt with the mythical past of the people, than "The Little Town" is more focused on the present reality of the community.[531]

The Hebrew narrative poems "The Melodies of the Time" and "The Little Town" signify the last stage in Peretz's writing career as a predominantly Hebrew poet.[532] Those two poems were followed by Peretz's major debut in Yiddish, which was a narrative pseudo-balladic poem entitled "Monish" (1888), considered to be the first time that folk narrative was seriously employed in modern Yiddish literature.[533] With a style and plot heavily influenced by Goethe's *Faust,*[534] Peretz's protagonist is a promising Yeshiva student who is seduced by

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[529]See also: Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef,* 266.

[530]Ibid, taf-tsadek; see also: Miron, *Der imazh fun shtetl*, 103-104.

[531]See also: Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef,* 263-268.

[532]Ibid, 267.

[533]Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 80.

[534]David Roskies this point in relation to Peretz's influence on I.B. Singer's demon stories. See David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 290.

the devil in the form of the daughter of a German merchant,[535] a newcomer to the *shtetl*. As in the inner-story in "A Weaver's Love", the invasion of capitalism to the *shtetl* means that now "everything is a commodity" and "Everything becomes measured/ With golden coins."[536] The invasion of a particular *German* capitalist devil is also how Peretz shifts the discourse from the economic base into a cultural-ethnic discourse (or in other words – to the cultural-symbolic realm): the invasion of the "German" economy into the Yiddish speaking world (a distinction that does not exist in *Faust*). The diversion becomes a sexual one, when it expresses itself in the voice and body of the daughter, especially her singing of "Maria", which marks the consummation of the seduction. Peretz uses here a common motif in modern Jewish literature: the temptation of non-Jewish culture for Jews as embodied by the non-Jewish woman (with typically "Arian" features).[537] Peretz's usage of the temptation-motif stood out when it came out through his use of music as a vehicle of seduction.[538]

The poem's speaker intended to warn his readers away from this devil, and he does so, as we shall see, by trying to elevate the symbolic value of Yiddish, the language of his readers. In a kind of an independence hymn of Jewish cultural autonomy, Peretz continues the meta-linguistic discussion of Yiddish as the language of the people that he began in "The Melodies of the Time". There, as was previously discussed, he referred to Yiddish as "the language of Berl and Shmerl", meaning of the common "everyday Jews". It was a "confession" made by a

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[535]Described as a "*daytsh*" (a German), though he may very well be, as Niger points out (Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 173, n **) a Jew from Danzig who dresses as a German (meaning in modern European clothing). This was not an uncommon way in Eastern Europe to refer to maskilm and secularized Jews.

[536]See: Ale verk, vol 1, 15.

[537]A famous example would be Shay Agnon's Hebrew short story "*Ha-adonist Veha-rokhel*" ("The Lady and the Peddler"). For more on "Monish" and its elaborate publication history, see for example: Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 170-179; Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Creation of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 12-16.

[538]Ibid, 14.

member of the Hebrew intelligentsia about his fondness for Yiddish.[539] In "Monish" he contrasts Yiddish which he referred to as "*zhargon*"(a jargon) with other European languages and with German in particular:

> *Differently would my poem have sounded,*
> *If I were to sing it for non-Jews in their tongue,*
> *Not for Jews, not zhargon! –*
> *No proper sound, not proper tone!*
> *Neither for love, nor for emotion*
> *It has the suitable vocabulary or style…*
>
> *Our Yiddish has only jokes,*
> *{…}*
> *Not one word is gentle and smooth,*
> *For love, it's dead and dull (Ale verk, vol 1, 20-21)*[540]

Aware of the "low symbolic value" of Yiddish, Peretz must conduct this meta-linguistic discussion, in Yiddish, in order to overcome its perceived status. He does so with humor. The question of whether the Yiddish language can serve as a suitable tool for love poetry is one that Peretz will repeatedly confront in the following decades. He does indeed succeed, as we shall see, in writing Yiddish love poetry, but for the most part he preferred to write poetry with such themes in Hebrew. In Yiddish he focused his attention on social-protest themes, on collecting Yiddish folk-poetry, and on writing in a folk style himself; themes he perceived would be welcomed by his targeted readership of working class Jews and labor activists.

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[539]See also in the Introduction "Peretz's Attitudes towards Writing in Yiddish".

[540]A few sound-words are hard to translate from this passage in which he humorlessly puts down the Yiddish language. In the Yiddish it reads:""*Hertsl", "zele", "shats" and "shetsl - \ Es hot a ta'am vi lakrits pletsl;\ Es hot keyn ta'am, es hot keyn zalts,\ Un es shmekt nokh khazer-shmalts!*"(p. 15).A rough translation would be: "A young heart, a soul, treasure\ It has a flavor as licorice pastille\ It has no flavor, it has no salt\ And it still smells like pig-fat!"

Modernizing Hebrew Poetry?

In Hebrew poetry Peretz's most significant pretension of the 1890's was the collection of poetry "The Organ". Its entire opening poem reads as follows:

יחד עם כל הנצנים,

נעורה שושנת לבבי;

וברן כוכבי בקר וערב,

השתפכה גם שירת עוגבי...

ובהשמיע קול הזמיר,

נמס לבבי בדמעותי;

ועת נרדם הטבע מסביב,

נעורו כל חלומותי...[541]

Together with all the sprouts,
My heart's rose has bloomed;
With the exultation of the morning and evening stars,
The song of my organ has also gushed….

And when the songbird uttered its voice,
My heart was melting in my tears;
And when the nature around me fell asleep,
All my dreams awoke…

What is first most striking about these verses is the short length of this poem. Two short stanzas, each consisting of two long lines and an ABCB rhyme scheme. Second, in a stark contrast to the epic poetry he was used to writing, it lacks a narrative. And third, it invents the individual as a poetic subject: the poem talks about "my heart's rose", "the song of my organ",

[541]Peretz, *Kol kitvey*, taf-tsadek-alef.

"my heart", "my tears", and "my dreams". Here, in this opening *ars-poetic* poem, the "troubled soul" of the individual, which sought refuge in his poem "The Little Town" now acts in the "The Organ" poems as the only source of poetic creation, the only source of perspective.

David Frishman led the opposing camp concerning "The Organ", accusing it of lacking any originality, and of plagiarizing the works of Heine. Further, he criticized Peretz's language as improper and vulgar. More interesting for this discussion is Frishman's observation that in contrast to Heine's short poems, which include one quadrilateral stanza a thesis in its first two lines, and its anti-thesis in its last two, Peretz's poetry lacks such dialectics.[542] To prove his point, Frishman gives the introductory-stanza of "The Organ"-cycle, which is written in the first person:

בהשבר לבבי בקרבי כחרס,
את בשרי בשני נשאתי;
ובשפה לה זרה עתה תשתפך
ותקונן שירתי!
(Perets, Kol kitvey, taf-tsadek-alef)
When my heart broke as clay,
I bit my lips;
And now in a foreign language
My poetry would gush and lament!

Peretz introduces romantic concepts in this opening stanza regarding the origin of his poetry: "The Organ" is the poetry of a broken heart.[543] "Broke as clay" is used in Hebrew (and in

[542]David Frishman, *Mikhtavim 'al hasifrut: sefer alef* (Hebrew) {Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv: M. Newman Publishing, 1968}, 120-121.

[543]In another poem in the "Organ" we read that the contempt he received from his beloved were as "Arrows to my heart's wounds\ From there my rhymes will spout." In another poem it is his guts responding to his "inner organ" that stimulate poetry out of his heart.

Yiddish for that matter) for something that easily breaks. The metaphor is taken from the High-Holiday prayerbook and signifies the temporary, mortal nature of man. Here it used in an isolated-synecdochic way to signify only the speaker's broken heart, which has a tendency easily to break ("as clay"). The next line signifies restraint which is self-imposed on the speaker by the act biting his own lips (literally "his flesh"). The act of restraint might seem contradictory to his broken heart, but the "clay" parable weakens this contradiction, for it gives the act of breaking a sense of a familiar habit rather than that of an intense emotional storm. The transition to the realm of language in the second long line contradicts the restraining reaction by the speaker in the first line (his lips do not produce any sound) to his "gush and lament" poetics. The speaker claims he writes "his poetry" in a "foreign language", the language he is capable of producing in his state of "broken heartiness'", which is the point of departure for his creativity.

In the introductory stanza to "The Organ," we read Peretz's declaration of the kind of poetry he wants to create in this collection. It is a kind of poetry that is influenced by the sophisticated oscillation between copresence and absence of the first person speaker that characterizes Heine's *Buch der Lieder* (1827).[544] But it doesn't go all the way with this kind of poetics and instead, allows its first person speaker to dominate through its parts. Frishman is partially correct in observing that these lines lack a dialectical–relationship between its components (there is a contradiction between muted lips to his "gush and lament" poetics, but they are complimentary not antithetical). It is an *ars-poetica* stanza that doesn't reach the same heights as does, for example, Bialik's *ars-poetic* poem "Lo zakhiti be-or min ha-hefker"

[544]Na'ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Zionist Remaking of Literary Space* (Northwestern University Press, 2013), 26-27.

(1902) reaches with its perfect figurative expressiveness. Peretz's "broken heart" seems indeed shattered with Bialik's charismatic sparkling "light" as a poetic point of departure.

This short opening poem and the epigraph before it are part of a cycle of 30 poems of similar length that together make up "The Organ". The cycle structure allows Peretz to express in short poems different opinions towards his beloved and the concept of love. As previously mentioned, Heine did the same in *Buch der Lieder* and in his collection *Romanzero* (1851), writing such short and highly ironic poems which contradict one another; poems that seem naïve and tragic, like the famous "Lorelei". Peretz made an attempt in "The Organ" to emulate Heine's unique style and spirit. Peretz has done so since his early attempts at writing Hebrew poetry from the mid 1870's that were preserved as manuscripts and were never published.[545] But twenty years later, when Peretz returned to this form of short-ironic love poems, he did it at a time when Hebrew poetry was already moving on to other more modern directions, absorbing the recent modernist trends from other European literatures.

The main poet who led these new trends in Hebrew poetry was Bialik. His modernist writing effectively swept away all of the older Hebrew poets of the Haskalah. Thus when "The Organ" was published concurrently with Bialik's rise, it was already dated, and was not – as some critics posit – instrumental in introducing modernist trends into Hebrew poetry.[546] Even its title, as Harel points out, followed the Haskalah norm of titles of musical instruments (the violin, the harp), as a stereotypical metaphor for poetry.[547] In this regard, Peretz's essays

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[545]Peretz's few polish poems of the 1870's carried a similar Heine-esque quality. Those early Hebrew poems were reprinted in Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 82.

[546]Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature*, 18; and Shlomo Harel, "Iyun Mehudash be Shirei HaUgav shel Y. L. Peretz,"(A Reconsideration of the "Organ Poems" of Y.L. Peretz) (Hebrew), in *Studies in Hebrew Literature: V* (Tel Aviv: Univ. Pub. Projects, Tel Aviv U, 1986), 117-118.

[547]Ibid, 119, N4.

about the trends in Hebrew literature (such as those which appeared in *The Arrow*, about Yalag) pushed for more innovation that was displayed in his "Organ" poems.

As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in contrast to Frishman's overall negative view, Klausner saw in these poems the passionate-personal poetry that Hebrew literature needed in order for it to be recognized as "European literature". Klausner was also responding to M.L. Lilienblum (1843-1910), who argued that Hebrew poetry lacked the foundations of European love poetry (the Medieval tradition of chivalrous poetry), and that in fact love poetry originates from the Hebrew bible.[548] As we've seen previously, it was Peretz who doubted a decade earlier, for other reasons, that love poems could be written in the language of the commoners – Yiddish.

Klausner criticized several "Organ" poems, claiming they lacked ideas and focused on the musicality of the words alone. Klausner also mistakenly termed the "Organ" poems as "following the French decadents and symbolists."[549] Klausner's accusation fails to recognize that the protagonist in Peretz's poems is not yet fully detached from nature, nor is he a city dweller like a Baudelaire. Instead, Peretz's character is still embedded in romantic conventions and Haskalah poetics.

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[548]For more on the storm that "The Organ" created amongst critics, see: M. L. Lilienblum, "Divrei Zemer," In *Luah akhiasaf*. Vol. 5. (Warsaw: Shuldberg Brothers, 1897). Rokem, Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Zionist Remaking of Literary Space, 61-64; Bar-Yosef, Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature, 18-19; Barzel, Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef, 271-272; and also Shlomo Harel, "Iyun Mehudash be Shirei HaUgav shel Y. L. Peretz," 118-120. Frishman adds in relation to the language of "The Organ" that Peretz "is writing Yiddish in Hebrew words" ("jargonit be-milim ivriyot"), see Frishman, Mikhtavim 'al hasifrut: sefer alef, 116-117. But the examples he gives are meager and less convincing. For more about Frishman's critique see Menuha Gilboa, Ben re'alizm le-romantikah [Between Realism and Romanticism: A Study of the Critical Work of David Frishman] (Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv, 1975), 64-66.

[549]Ibid, 66.

Contemporary scholars, like Shlomo Harel and Hamutal Bar-Yosef, tend to agree more with Klausner, about the novelty that the "Organ" poems posses. Bar-Yosef crowned Peretz as the writer who introduced modernist trends in Hebrew literature with "The Organ" and in "The Arrow" as discussed in the previous chapter. Peretz himself surely had such ambitions. But ambitions aside, at least as a poet (it was easier for him to be innovative in his prose work since he started writing prose in a much later period), he matured during the Haskalah-period of Hebrew poetry. Younger poets, like Bialik and to a lesser degree Tchernichovsky, would take the center stage, and easily integrate modernist writing styles in their work. The focal shift from the social, historic, and conceptual outer-spheres to the individual's human inner-psychology which is typical to modernist literature – does not yet achieve the same full and organic level of incorporation in Peretz's Hebrew poetry, as Bialik and Berdichevsky achieved in their work.[550] Examining other examples from "The Organ" would help determine to what degree Peretz succeeded in venturing away from traditional poetic structures.

Shlomo Harel claims that the poem "I Won't Come to your House" from "The Organ" is innovative in terms of its poetic structure, for it provides its readers with a dynamic sort of reading and its lines are rich with ambiguity and oxymoronic expressions.[551] Harel maintains that it can almost be called a "reverse poem", meaning a poem whose ending changes the

[550]Miron, *Bo'ah, laylah: hasifrut ha'ivrit bein higayyon le'e-gayyon bemifneh hame'ah ha'esrim*, 14-15.

[551]Harel, "Iyun Mehudash be Shirei HaUgav shel Y. L. Peretz," 121-124.

meaning of the poem up until that point; a complex form in which Bialik excelled.[552] Like the first poem discussed, it is short:

לא אבוא אל ביתך, יפתי,
כי שם רגעי אשרי נוראים,
כי לא אור פניך וחסדך
מפלסת את בין הבאים;
את שם את לבבי קורעת,
ומחלקה לכל את הגזרים;
ולמה זה אטבע בדמי
ואעבור עוד בין הבתרים?[553]

I won't come to your house, my pretty one,
For there are my moments of terrible bliss,
For it is not the light of your face and your grace
That you are weighing between those who come;
There you tear up my heart,
And distribute to all the shreds;
And why should I drown in my own blood
And still pass between its pieces?

Again we see the emphasis on the invented subject and on his relationship to another individual. The poetic speaker "he" won't come to "her" home, because there he experiences moments of "terrible bliss" – an oxymoron expressing an intense level of emotion. Harel suggests that the adjective "*nora*" (terrible), particularly in rereading the poem after its full meaning has sunk in, means "very, great",[554] but it is in fact a common feature in 19th century poetry and does not necessarily indicate that this is a "reverse poem".

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[552]The term a "reverse poem" was first introduced by Menakhem Peri in his article analyzing Bialik's poetry: "Hitbonenuyot ba-Mivne ha-Temati shel Shire Bialik: Ha-Shir Ha-Mithapekh Ve-Ekhav," (Hebrew) *Ha-Sifrut* 1.2 (1969): 40-82.

[553]Peretz, *Kol kitvey*, ibid.

[554]Harel, "Iyun Mehudash be Shirei HaUgav," 124.

A key word in the poem for determining whether or not it is a reverse poem is the word "*betarim*" (pieces, parts) at the end of the poem. The word "*betarim*" was used in the Hebrew Bible to signify the covenant between God and Abraham ("*brit ben ha-btarim*" – an agreement between the parts consecrated through the dissection of animals into pieces). Its connotation strengths the interpretation of both the beloved's home as being parallel to the Promised Land – God's promise to Abraham's seed in a "land other than their own"(Genesis 15: 13); as well as the promise of romantic favors of the beloved to the poetic-speaker, a promise to his own private seed. The speaker likens himself to the fire that went between God and the "*betarim*", that is the fire of passion.

However, the word "*betarim*" does not change the overall meaning of the poem. The line it appears in does not contradict the meaning of the poem thus far, but rather continues the same argument from the poem first line, which warns of the danger of sexual passion. This argument might seem as an inner-contradiction in itself, but it is one that is put forth clearly in the first reading of the poem.

In the previous chapter we touched upon the song of the sailor in "A Summer House", which was included in the "Organ". The poem expressed the sailor's genuine love. It was intended to create within the reader an elevation of the soul and of freedom from the sense of emotional inhibitions that are imposed by the modern urban existence. Another way in which Peretz tries to resolve this state of emotional repression is through Orientalist imagery such as can be found in this stanza that opens in the "Organ":

בחלומי ימסו אסירי,
חפשי אני כערבי
במדבר, הסואן בדממה
להשקיט את סערת לבבי!
(In my dreams my chains would melt,

I am free as an Arab
In the dessert, bustling in silence
To still the storm of my heart!)

This orientalist dream-fantasy of the primitive Arab in the wilderness is the dominant imagery in this poem. The speaker appropriates an Arab person (who is not an individual person, but just a cultural category), in the same way he appropriates "his horse" in the next stanza "light as an Eagle", and "his star" in the third stanza (and back to his own coprs in the last stanza). The speaker goes on a nightly journey in order "To still the storm of my heart!" – an anaphora that repeats itself with small variations at the end of each stanza. Rhyming *aravi* ("Arab") with *levavi* ("my heart"), assumes the possessive-article (for his heart) also towards "an Arab". The possessive-article is absent for the Arab in the same way the violent nature of the speaker's appropriation of space is silenced. Nighttime is also associated with passivity, when the western individual needs to recover from a day's work. Nighttime-passivity thus belongs to the orient. It the part of the day in which the orient, where people work less and live in their strange and primitive world, operates. In short, the east is yearning to be redeemed.

Remember that the "Organ" came out at the same year as his journal "The Arrow", which included the allegorical short story "The Violin: An Arab Legend". The public debates which Peretz was involved in regarding the colonization of Palestine, and the romantic tradition of representation of the orient[555] (of course these two categories are not at all separate), are what gave birth to such imagery. But if "The Violin" could be interpreted as containing a warning against the destruction embedded in the colonization-project, in the poem there is no trace of such a sentiment.

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[555]The classic book on the subject is by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978).

I mentioned earlier that Peretz was hailed for "The Organ" by Klausner, for its innovative deployment of sensual lyricism in Hebrew. Several poems in the "Organ" do attempt to express erotic physical sensuality. But what kind sensuality is this? Is it innovative?

Sensation in modernist poetry, writes Jameson, is classified metaphorically, by ways of analogies and similarities.[556] The following examples from the "Organ" should help us answer these questions:

תעלומות כוכבים ושחקים\ אגלה יפתי, בעיניך;
ואבן סוד שיח הפרחים,\עת יזל צוף עדן שפתיך.
ועת ידך הקטנה על ראשי,\לי נפתח כל ספר הקורות;
(Mysteries of stars and skies\ I will discover my pretty one, in your eyes;
And the secret of the flower bush\When the nectar of your lips will flow.
And when your little hand on my head,\To me the great book opens up;)

קומי ונצא השדה,\נשב על גבעה רעננה;
שם אני מושל יחידי\תחת כף רגליך הקטנה!
(Rise and we will go to the field\and sit on a marry hill;
There I rule alone\Under your little foot!)

הושיטי כפיך,\האירי פניך,
ומאושר אנוכי\בין כל חלליך...
(Reach out your hands\Put a light on your face,
And I am happy\Amongst all your casualties…)

As in the earlier example which uses a very simplistic set of analogies in which the speaker's love functions as a "revealer of secrets", these examples show that the poetry of the "Organ" does not innovate. It does not present a complex modernist sense of the sensual, despite

[556]Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, 229.

striving to do so (as when the speaker declares he is "happy" amongst all of his beloved's "casualties"). The contradictions like the speaker who "rules alone" over his beloved, but does so under her "little foot" and synesthesias are not as striking and as sharp as in modernist poetr. Nor are they, strong enough to give the reader a dynamic experience, since their meanings do not change much between their first and second readings. The poems are personal and short, but they fail to transmit the complex inner-experience of the individuals psyche. What we do have here is a very primeval attempt at neo-romantic modernist poetry. It is clear that Peretz would have liked to link his cycle with the most recent trends in European literature, and that he did incorporate some modernist elements in his poetry. However, on the whole, he falls short of achieving this goal.

"The Organ" collection, despite its being already analyzed and discussed at length since it came out in 1894, deserves still a more thorough and complete analysis of its poetic components and of the overall quality than was offered here. I do however wish to point out an aspect of "The Organ" collection that has been largely ignored by scholars of Hebrew poetry, namely its relation to Peretz's Yiddish poetry and to his interest in the ballad form and in folklore in general.

In a gushing introduction to this volume written by its publisher Shvartsberg puts the nationalist values of the "Organ"-collection front and center. Shvartsberg includes these poems as part of Hebrew poetry as a whole; which he characterizes as "the poetry of Zion in the Diaspora". Peretz's cycle, writes the publisher, is capable of bringing back "the lost sons to their mother, that is Hebrew poetry."[557] But these Hebrew poems were not detached from Peretz's creativity in Yiddish. During the first half of the 1890's Peretz published a series of

[557]Quoted in: Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef*, 271.

ballads in Yiddish that in many ways paralleled Hebrew poems of "The Organ" in form and style. One striking similarity can be found between the Hebrew "*Kadru shamaym ka-kheres*" and the Yiddish "A *volkn hot fardekt dem himl*". The poem, first in Hebrew, then in Yiddish, reads:

קדרו שמים כחרס ונפשי נפעמה;
כי חיש גם את עיני יכסו
חרסי אדמה.
ובטפות קרות יבכיו
עתה העבים על שברי;
ובדמעות קרות תבכינה
אז עיני היפה על קברי.[558]

The sky darkened as a broken earthen pot
And my soul was thrilled;
For soon my eyes would also be covered
By clods of earth.

And with cold drops would weep
Now the clouds on my crisis;
And with cold tears then will cry
The eyes of the pretty one over my grave.

אַ וואָלקן האָט פֿאַרדעקט דעם הימל,
ווי אַ שוואַרצער שאַרבן:
עס איז פֿינצטער ווי אין קבֿר,
דאַכט זיך מיר, כ'וועל שטאַרבן.

אויף מײַן קרענקלעך-הייסן שטערן
פֿאַלט אַ טראָפּן שווער;
צי וועט דעמאָלט, אויף מײַן קבֿר
פֿאַלן אירס אַ טרער?[559]

[558]Perets, Kol kitvey, taf-tsadek-gimel. In the first version of the poem (1893), the third line of the third stanza starts with the vocal expression "haa" instead of the word "ki" ("for") in the "Ha-ugav" version (see: Haasif 6 (1893): 170.

[559]Peretz, Ale verk vol 1, 192.

A cloud covered the sky,
As a black broken earthen pot:
It is dark as in the grave,
It seems to me, I will die.

On my hot-feverish forehead
Drops heavily a drop;
Will then, on my grave,
Fall her tear?

Peretz's achievement in both these poems is clear, when it is understood that he based them on a folk-ballad, from a collection of Yiddish folks-songs which he was collecting at the time.[560] This ballad opens with the lyrics: "Black clouds covered the sky,\ It became dark in the world;\ And a thousand people went on a walk,\ Everybody walked as one."[561] Then, a young man's cry for help came from the river. The people pulled out his body, but they were too late; he was dead and his feet were bitten in several places. His young fiancée shed her tears next to his corpse, and the poem ends with the verse:

While he was brought to the cemetery,
His fiancée shed so many tears;
Master-of-the-Universe, show your wonders,
Allow me to lay by his feet![562]

The act of modernizing the folk-ballad is expressed in several ways. First, it means the elimination of the clear narrated-balladic structure, and the replacement of its multiple voices (voice of a narrator, the fiancée, and people by the river) by the single individual voice. In the Yiddish version Peretz replaced the weeping fiancée at the grave and the exclamation mark at

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[560]See: Khane Gordon-Mlotek, "Y.L. Perets' zamlung yidishe folkslider," YIVO-Bleter n.s. 4 (2003): 40-41 (n 24), 66 (n 24).

[561]Ibid, 40-41.

[562]Ibid, 41.

the end, with the question in first person from the male speaker: "Will then, on my grave,\ Fall her tear?"

In the ballad, the young fiancée is not only accompanied by a 1000 people who "walked as one" – but she also sheds "so many tears", while the poetic-speaker in the Yiddish version craves a single tear from his loved one. In both cases the female figure is transformed from being a fiancée in the ballad (a female with a defined role in traditional society), to a mere adjective "the pretty one", in the Hebrew. In Yiddish she is even further reduced to just the pronoun "her" (from "her tear"). The last two examples show that in certain elements, Peretz took this poem in Yiddish into an even more modern direction than he did in Hebrew.

In addition, all the Jewish folkloristic pre-modern elements in the ballad concerning a Jewish-wedding and burial are erased, in favor of a sheer neutral setting both ethnically and religiously in Peretz's poems: the board on which dead people are laid before cleansing (*ta'are-bret*), the engagement contract (*di tnoim*), the invocation of the Master of the Universe (*riboyne-shel-oylem)*, etc.). One element which was preserved in all three versions of these poems is its rhyme scheme – in all of them it is the standard ABCB (two broken long-lines make each stanza).

The act of "modernizing folk-ballads" was not uncommon in European poetry during the 18th century. Poets such Blake, Wordsworth, Scott, were often referred to as belonging to the "ballad revival". In the scholarship it was at times associated with democratization and progressive currents, marking a breaching of the boundaries between elite and popular culture, creating a place where Utopia could surface.[563] The opposite view, stemming from

[563]Solomon writes in relation to Bloch's concept of "Utopia". See "Ernst Bloch: Introduction" in Maynard Solomon, ed., Marxism *and* Art*: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, 571.

post-colonial theory, sees this movement as nothing more than an attempt by elite circles to appropriate popular culture. In this view, the modernization of folk ballads can be viewed as an act of borrowing of "low art" by producers of "high art", at times used in the cause as a tool of imperialism.[564] But Steve Newman correctly points out that:

> *Popular song is not intrinsically progressive; it has no built-in politics. And while it is important not to dismiss poetic justice as "just poetry," it is equally important not to forget the mediations that are inseparable from Literature as long as the cultural field remains structured by divisions between "high," "middlebrow," and "low" or the lecture hall and the street or "restricted" and "general" economies of production. To erase those mediations courts a facile notion of the relationship between culture and politics.*[565]

This observation means that one must consider the ballads in their own right, viewing in each case whether Peretz's modernization of ballad resulted in a progressive poem or was merely an appropriation of popular culture. These distinctions will emerge again in this chapter, when analyzing Peretz's socialist Yiddish poetry, from using the ballad from in his poem *Dray neytorins*, as well as when we explore how deeply his practice of collecting "Jewish folklore" informed his work. Regarding the "economies of production", especially concerning the *Bletlekh*, where much of this material was published, I have already shown in the second chapter the progressive nature of this publication outlet.

The significance of adopting a bi-lingual view when speaking of Peretz's poetry was also shown in the last segment. Beginning with "Monish", continuing with his positivist long

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[564]There are numerous studies on the subject. One can start with Albert Friedman, *The Ballad Revival* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961). For a more recent study see Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[565]Ibid, 14.

poem *Der balegole* (The Coachman, 1891[566]), and through the 1890's and onward, Peretz produced more and more of his poetry in Yiddish, which was the proper poetic medium for addressing the Jewish working class,[567] even while he continued to publish Hebrew poems until close to his death.[568] While both languages informed his writing, Yiddish was the primary vehicle for his ethno-class faction. His Yiddish poetry from the 1890's is dominated by a radical Jewish-socialist tone . This radical work is the focus of the next section.

Socialist Yiddish Poetry and Political Poetry

The cover of most issues of the ground-breaking journal *Yontef bletlekh*, featured an original poem by Peretz, but poetry was rarely published in the inner pages of the journal. These Yiddish "cover" poems were meant to serve as a poetic companion to the articles and short stories that constituted the main content of the journal.

According to Hannan Hever, political poetry needs to successfully result in the "disruption of the rules of discourse",[569] and have a "political effect on readers."[570] Following these two requirements, I will ask: to what degree did these "cover" poems, and his other poems for the period, meet the basic requirements of political poetry?

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[566]A poem similar in structure to his previous style of long Hebrew poems (short 4 line stanzas, ABCB), in which an old coachman bemoans the destruction of the *shtetl*.

[567]See also Miron, H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry, 18-19.

[568]Like in the story "The Source of Souls", or in the story discussed in the previous chapter "In a Summer Home". For more see: Barzel, Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef, 278-281.

[569]Hannan Hever, "Poetry," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 2 (2012): 1, accessed December 30, 2012, doi: http://www.politicalconcepts.org/poetry-hannan-hever/ .

[570]Hever, "Poetry," 7.

One of the poems often pointed to as representative of Peretz's socialist convictions is the poem "*Dray neytorins*" ("Three Knitters").[571] In this case, Peretz used the popular form of the ballad, and it became a very popular song which is frequently included in anthologies of Yiddish "folksongs" or workers' poems.[572] Here it is first in Yiddish followed by my English translation:

די אויגן רויט, די ליפן בלאָ,
קיין טראָפן בלוט אין באַק נישטאָ,
דער שטערן בלאַס, באַדעקט מיט שווייס!
דער אָטעם אָפגעהאַקט און הייס - -
עס זיצן דרײַ מיידלעך און נייען!

די נאָדל - בלאַנק, די לײַוונט – שניי
און איינע טראַכט איך ניי און ניי.
איך ניי בײַטאָג, איך ניי בײַנאַכט,
קיין חופּה-קלייד זיך נישט געמאַכט!
וואָס קומט אַרויס, איך ניי?

נישט איך שלאָף און נישט איך עס...
איך וואָלט געגעבן אויף מאיר-בעל-הנס,
אפֿשר וואָלט ער זיך געמיט:
אַן אַלמן כאָטש, אַן אַלטן ייִד.
מיט קינדערלעך אַ שאָק!
די צווייטע טראַכט, איך ניי און שטעפּ,
און שטעפּ מיר אויס נאָר גראָע צעפּ!
דער קאָפּ - דער ברענט, די שלייף – זי האַקט,
און די מאַשין קלאַפּט-צו צום טאַקט:
טאַ-טאַ, טאַ-טאַ, טאַ-טאַ!

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[571]*Kol Khamiro*, 1895; Ale Verk, vol 1, 153-154.

[572]Yoysef and Khana Mlotek, *Perl fun der yidisher poezye* (Yiddish) (Tel-Aviv, Y.-L.-Perets-Farlag, 1974**)**, 70. According to one testimony from Łódź, a Polish city formerly known for its textile industry and for being a strong hold of Jewish socialism:"This poem quickly became very popular and people started to sing it next to every weaving loom."(Ibid, 541). It was included for example in the collection *Arbeter lider* (Worker's Poems) Warsaw: Progress, 1906); that same collection included also a Yiddish translation of a Thomas Hood poem that influenced "*Dray neytorins*" very much, see more in this chapter.

איך פַּאַרשטיי דאָך יענעמס ווינק!
אָן אַ חופּה, אָן אַ רינג,
וואָלט געווען אַ שפּיל, אַ טאַנץ,
אַ ליבע אויף - אַ יאָר אַ גאַנץ!
נאָר דערנאָך, דערנאָך?

די דריטע שפּיט מיט בלוט און זינגט:
איך ני מיך קראַנק, איך ני מיך בלינד.
עס צוויקט די ברוסט בײַ יעדן שטאָך...
און ער - האָט חתונה די וואָך!
איך ווינטש אים נישט קיין שלעכטס!

עט, פַּאַרגעסן וואָס אַמאָל!...
תכריכים וועט מיר געבן קהל,
אויך אַ קליינטשיק פּיצל ערד,
איך וועל רוען אומגעשטערט,
שלאָפֿן, שלאָפֿן, שלאָפֿן!
The eyes are red, the lips are blue
No drop of blood in the cheek,
The forehead pale, covered with sweat!
The breath panting and hot - -
Sit three maidens and sew!

The needle – shiny, the linen – snow
And one of them thinks, "I knit and knit.
I knit by day, I knit by night,
No wedding dress I made for myself!
What comes out of it, I knit?

I don't sleep and I don't eat…
I would have gone to ask for a miracle,
Maybe that would have benefited me:
At least a widower, an old Jew.
With small children, a shock!"

The second thinks, "I knit and stitch,
And stitch myself a grey solitude!
The head – it burns, the shoulder – it breaks,

And the machine knocks to the rhythm:
Ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta!"

I understand as you know that guy's wink!
Without a canopy, without a ring,
It would have been a game, a dance,
A love for a whole year!
But afterwards, afterwards?"

The third spits blood and sings:
"I'm knitting myself sick, I'm knitting myself blind.
The breast breaks with every stitch…
And he – is getting married this week!
I don't wish him any harm!

Eh, to forget what was!...
Shrouds the community will give me,
And also a tiny piece of land,
I will rest undisturbed,
Sleep sleep, sleep!

The poem, as we read, consists of seven stanzas, of five short lines each, and an AABBC rhyme scheme. Its content is built on three monologues by three different seamstresses, working under difficult conditions and with poor chances of establishing a happy family life or economic stability. Introducing them is a stanza by a poetic-narrator, probably male. The dramatic progression from the first seamstress (who hopes to match with "At least a widower, an old Jew\ With small children…"); to the second seamstress (who is only offered a short-term romance "Without a canopy, without a ring", thus a life of "grey solitude!"); and the third ("shrouds" and "a tiny piece of land" to burry herself while her man "is getting married") – signifies a process of decay. The poem goes through the following stations:

A. Pathetic hopes.
B. Living with the realization of lack of options.

C. Quitting with life all together.

As in the story "Weavers' Love", the thread which thematically connects the components are is the inability of fulfilling the hope for marriage. Here the bourgeois ideal of marriage becomes shattered amongst the new urban working class. The labor of women, and in this poem strictly poor women, prevents them from fulfilling their dreams of family life, exhausts them, and leads them in some case to prefer to end their meager existence. As in our times, when a worker in China, or other parts of the world cannot afford the products she makes, so too in Peretz's poem the seamstresses cannot afford to purchase their own work. "For myself I made no wedding dress!", says the first woman, expressing her sense of alienation from the product of her labor, as Marx described.

By focusing on the inability to marry (at best they can have an affair), as the key disaster of the modern enslavement of the seamstresses, is how Peretz has tied personal and familial suffering to the economic contradictions of emerging capitalist society. Peretz is disrupting the rules of discourse – he is breaking the artificial walls separating the social-economic sphere from the sphere of familial-love. Peretz was by no means the first writer to connect economic and romantic relations. However, here he achieves a successful artistic exploration of this theme.

But another reality is exposed in Peretz's poem, the reality that the institution of marriage itself constitutes of a form of oppression for women. In Engels's view, the institution of marriage is for women not fundamentally different from that of prostitution:

> *... marriage is determined by the class position of the participants, and to that extent always remains marriage of convenience… this marriage of convenience often enough turns into the crassest prostitution – sometime on both sides, but much more generally on the part of the wife, who differs*

from the ordinary courtesan only in that she does not hire out her body, like a wage-worker, on piecework, but sells it into slavery once and for all.[573]

Peretz uses the format of unreliable speakers, who speak directly, in order to stress the falseness of their ideology: the ideology of "marriage". Peretz's knitters see their only possible redemption in the fulfillment of marriage, and they mourn their impossibility of achieving it. In contrast, the speaker of the intro-stanza does not mention marriage at all, but just stresses the body marks and the physical symptoms of the female-knitters caused by the toll of their labor. He thus underlies the unreliability of the three female speakers, and in this manner, Peretz exposes their false view of marriage as *redemption*, as opposed to a *social struggle*. But has Peretz succeeded here in creating revolutionary art, and a political poem? Is there a call in the poem to better the working conditions of women-workers– the obvious political effect such a poem is suppose to have on its readers?

Another way of looking at the role of this "neutral" narrator is that he occupies the role of an anti-*shadkhan* (an anti-matchmaker). Such a character of an anti-*shadkhan* serves as the one who depicts the bio-physical unworthiness of the three young females in the modern day marital industry. In this way, Peretz affirms rather than disrupts the rules of discourse, because the conclusion for the community in the poem is to better the working conditions of female laborers mainly so they would be more suitable for marriage[574]. In any case, this poem requires further analysis, to be made later in this chapter.

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[573]Quoted in: "Prostitution: Introduction," In *Applications of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives: Sex, Violence, Work, and Reproduction* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1996), 191. Quoted from: F. Engels, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," in R. Tucker ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* 742 (W. W. Norton & Co., 2d ed. 1978).

[574]An alternative view can be that it casts their fate so bleakly, meaning that even if they had better pay and working conditions, they would still face the oppression of marriage, and would still lack any political power.

Another poem which is often mentioned as embodying Peretz's socialist vision, is the long dramatic poem "*Baym fremdn khupe kleyd: a stsene fun varshever lebn*" ("By a Foreign Wedding Dress: A Scene from Life in Warsaw"). It appeared in two consecutive volumes of the *Yontef bletlekh*,[575] and it is considered to be influenced by Vintshevski's Yiddish rendition of "The Song of the Shirt", as was "The Three Knitters".[576] "*Baym fremdn khupe kleyd*" was described by Rosentsvayg as "the most perfect social thing by Peretz,"[577] a statement worth examining closely. Its very title suggests again the central role that the institution of marriage plays in the poem, but its actual plot surrounds the manufacturing of a fancy wedding dress, the object of fetish throughout the poem. The poem is over 80 stanzas long, and contains various rhyme schemes and tempos. Many of the stanzas are structured as a folksong: two long lines broken into four (quatrains), and an ABCB rhyme scheme; but occasionally the lines are rhymed using couplets, and these lines tend to be longer. The story is set in a sweatshop that produces high fashion. It is a dramatic poem, consisting of several characters, who are supposedly speaking to each other: a matron, two female hat-makers, and a choir of young seamstresses. The collective voice of the choir takes the class-oriented voice of the three seamstresses one step forward, joining their individualistic voices and expressing collective-class interests, spoken in a tight folksong style.

The collective voice of the workers changes one quarter of the way into the poem, when a young female laborer, who calls herself "*lustik-lebn*" ("cheerful-life") steps out of the group,

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[575]In the volume entitled "*Oyneg Shabes*" (The Pleasure of the Sabbath, 1896), and in the following volume "*Khamishoser*" (Tu Bishvat).

[576]Nokhem Borekh Minkov, *Pionern fun yidisher poeziye in amerike* (Yiddish) (New York: Grenich, 1956), 1:61-62.

[577]Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 77.

and starts to argue with the others. She claims she wants to enjoy her young years without any excessive material gains like the diamonds and pearls that are placed on the wedding dress they are working on. But the poor depressed choir mocks her cheery "modesty-vanity", as the product of her youth and naiveté.

This long poem unfolds as a discussion amongst the have-nots held during the manufacturing of an item for the haves. After two ballads by the choir, the theme focuses on an inner-story told by one of the hat-makers. This inner-story is structured as a folk story which the narrator heard from her grandmother, and it expresses what Minkov termed "symbolism-out-of-realism", in which, like in Thomas Hood's poem, "the realistic character and the atmosphere around it turn into a symbol."[578] This inner-story is reminiscent of the inner-story in "A Weaver's Love" where the "capitalist"-sorcerer enters into the pious *shtetl*.[579] In both cases, a pseudo-folk legend serves the dual purpose of making an anti-capitalist statement, and a statement regarding the potential power of literature in promoting social change. By shedding light on their situation, the inner-stories in Peretz's work help his working class characters become aware of their exploitation, and of the social dynamic which defines it.[580]

The story recounts the tale of two brothers who live together in a modest little house in the valley. Though their house is modest, it is a happy one, with a tiny little window, which lets just the right amount of golden sunshine inside. The brothers, who work hard, live a modest life of brotherly affection. However, as in "Weaver's Love", this idyll is disrupted when a

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[578]Minkov, *Pionern fun yidisher poeziye in amerike*, 1:61-62.

[579]The similar theme in "Monish", bared a dominant nationalist tone rather than socialist one.

[580]For literature, reminds us Eagleton, in a sense like political theory, is supposed to guide people's actions in the world (Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* {Yale: Yale University Press, 2012}, 54).The story of the two brothers was also been set to music as a popular oratorio, by the Jewish American communist composer Jacob Schaeffer (1888-1936).

rich, seductive snake enters their relationship, who promises the older brother wealth beyond his imagination. The intimate relationship between the brothers ("two faithful hearts together"[581]) is replaced by a brother \snake relationship when the snake reveals the secrets of gaining wealth to the older brother.

The snake tells the older brother that the key to his happiness rests upon the exploitation of his brother's labor, or in the poems terms, the younger brother's blood, sweat, and tears[582] are worth diamonds and riches to the older brother. His brother's drops of sweat are equivalent to a diamond-factory for the older brother, and thus he needs to make him "work only hot!" (Ale verk, vol 1, 225). Each of his brother's tears also equals a diamond, and so the older brother is told to spend their assets in order to make his younger brother shed more tears. He is advised to manufacture blood by stabbing his brother with a needle. And now, the seductive snake tells him, in a mixture of the Biblical Adam and Eve and the Cain and Abel stories, "You have a factory,\ And make your fortune,\ You're stronger and already know the secret!" (226). The outcome of this story is of course capitalism. Technically the hat-maker never heard the end from her grandmother, but after she heard even part of it, the gloom of the story penetrated her reality. When the older brother returns home, we read the following:

עס הערט די לבֿנה נאָך ד׳איינציקע נאַכט,

.ווי ס׳האָט אינעם שטיבל געווינט און געלאַכט

עס קוקן די שטערן אין פֿענצטער אַריַין:

!ווי לאַכט עס אַ ברודער ביַם ברודערס געווייַן?

:די זון האָט צומאָרגנס געווונדערט זיך שטאַרק

[581]Ale verk, vol 1, 224.

[582]The phrase "blood, sweat, and tears", though made famous by Winston Churchill during the Second World War, was already circulating in several European languages from the early-mid 19th century. It is possible that Peretz was familiar with its French version *lacrime e sangue*.

ווי שלאָגט עס אַ ברודער דעם צווייטן אין קאַרק ?

עס וווּנדערט צוגלײַך

דעם וואַלד און דעם טײַך :

[583](226-227) וואָס איז עס אין שטיבל געשען ?

"The moon still hears only the night,
How in the shack it cried and laughed,
The stars are looking inside the windows:
How come a brother laughs at his brother's cry?!
The sun was wondering:
How come one smacks his brother in the neck?
The forest and the river are wondering as well:
What happened in the shack?

The ending of the inner-story tells us how within the hegemonic dominance of capitalism, exploitation of labor creates animosity between people, causing them to compete so selfishly for empty promises of wealth that they are willing to suck the blood, sweat, and tears from a brother. This provocative story, and the series of rhetorical questions at its end, stirs anger in its readers. In this sense, "*Baym fremdn khupe kleyd*" is a bona fide political poem.

In addition to its clear critique of capitalism, the poem is also critical of the institution of marriage. It exposes the exploitative process that goes into producing the wedding dress itself, which becomes the fetish of the narrative of marriage. Peretz also subverts the Haskalah literature and drama that preceded him, which promoted the Romantic version of

[583]In the original *Bletlekh* version, another stanza appears after this one in which we learn that both brothers suffer. One cannot sleep due to physical pain, while the other can't sleep out of fear of losing his property (the "disadvantages of privilege" we saw in Peretz's gothic story "In a Night of Horror").

marriage as superior to matchmaking, and unlike Peretz's self-published *Bletlekh*, had the Jewish bourgeoisie as its main patron.[584]

Peretz's Poetry in the Context of Socialist Yiddish Poetry

Before Peretz, others had introduced radical socialist sentiments into the repertoire of Yiddish poetry. Poets like Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923), Joseph Boshover (1973-1915), David Edelstadt (1866-1892), and other "sweatshop poets" who operated in America dominated the Yiddish poetic scene of the time, and influenced the development of Yiddish poetry in Eastern Europe.[585] Not that these writers were in any way a monolithic group. While Rosenfeld was depicting the lives of the exploited workers, and tended to be less ideological; Boshover and Edelstadt wrote anarchistic hymens, and raised different motives than Rosenfeld did. These poets created the proletarian base in Yiddish literature, while the three classics – Abramovitsh, Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem – were preparing the field for Yiddish literature in general.[586]

Another important pioneer of socialist Yiddish poetry was Morris Vintshevski. He started off as a Hebrew poet, who was in fact continuing the tradition who Yahalal and others have

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[584]Dan Miron, "Sifrut Ha-haskala Be-ivrit," (Hebrew) in: *Zman Yehudi Hadash New Jewish Times: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—An Encyclopedic View*, vol 3 (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007**)**, 27-41. And Etkes, Immanuel. 2010. Haskalah. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Haskalah (accessed February 6, 2013).

[585]See for example: Benjamin and Barbara Harshav. In *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*. Ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 32-33; and Minkov, *Pionern fun yidisher poeziye in amerike*, 1. Relatively recent extensive research on these poets can be found in Marc Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience: Morris Rosenfeld and the Emergence of Yiddish Literature in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); and in Ori Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy: David Edelshtat's Revolutionary Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: P. Lang, 1997).

[586]M. Olgin, "Di proletarishe rikhtung in der yidisher literatur," (Yiddish) *Almanakh: yubilee fun Internatsyonaler Arbeter* Orden *fun Yidishn Folks Ordn* (New York: Cooperativa Folks Farlag fun Internatzationaler Arber Ordn, 1940), 367. Olgin does admit that out of the first generation of classic writers, only Peretz was the one who wrote about Jewish workers (ibid, 366).

started in the 1870's, of socialist Hebrew poetry. As was shown in the previous chapter, Vintshevski pioneered the pseudo-prophetic poem style in Hebrew literature. His poem called for social justice, and it influenced Peretz deeply.[587] Since the 1890's, Vintshevski had published Yiddish poetry which was dominated by social themes and which expressed enthusiastic support for the socialist movement and its leaders. His was at times sentimental poetry, thus very different than the rhetorical-agitation poetry created by the American Yiddish poets such as Boshover and Edelstadt.

Like many others, Peretz was influenced by Vintshevski, both by his poetry and by his essays, who was also a onetime contributor to the *Yontef bletlekh*. Scholars including Minkov and Rosentsvayg, have shown the similarity between Peretz's most famous Yiddish poetry to earlier poems by Vintshevski. Many agree that the poems "*Baym fremdn khupe kleyd*" and "*Dray neytorins*" are heavily influenced by Vintshevski's translation-adaptation to Yiddish of the very popular English poem "The Song of the Shirt" (1843) by Thomas Hood, entitled "*Dos lid fun hemd*" (1884).[588] Its opening lines read:

מיט מאָגערע פֿינגער, דאַר און אויסגעדרייט,

מיט אויגן, וואָס זיַינען פֿון אַרבעט שוין בלינד –

אַ וויַבעלע זיצט זיך, אין לומפּן געקליידט,

און וואַרפֿט מיטן נאָדל און פֿאָדעם געשווינד,

שטעך-שטעך-שטעך !

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[587]Later, as was shown previously in the chapter, with Bialik entering the scene, the prophetic genre in Hebrew poetry was totally over-taken by Zionist poetry that called for national rejuvenation (Miron, *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 18-19).

[588]See: Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 76. And also: Minkov, *Pionern fun yidisher poeziye in amerike*, 1:61-62. The historian Shatski writes also about the influence of folklorists on Peretz in writing these poems (Shatski, "Perets-shtudyes," 54-56); and about Peretz's acquaintance with young female knitters, students of a Jewish evening artisan-school, whom he met going to dance halls in Warsaw (Ibid, 57).

אין הונגער, אין שמוץ, פֿאַר דער גאַנצער וועלט פֿרעמד,

נייַ איך מיט אַ דאָפּלטן פֿאָדעם: פֿאַר זיך

תכריכים - פֿאַר אַנדערע מענטשן אַ העמד.[589]

"With meager fingers, skinny and crooked,
With eyes, which are already blind from work –
A young woman sits down, dressed in rags,
And works quickly with the needle and thread,
Stitch-Stitch-Stitch!
In hunger, in dirt, alien from the whole world,
I knit with a double thread: for myself
Shrouds – for other people a shirt"[590]

The similarity to Peretz's "*Dray neytorins*" is striking and undeniable: the female speaker, the similar profession, and the poor conditions that lead the speaker believe she is knitting both a shirt for another and shrouds for herself. Vintshevski and Peretz were both following a tradition in English poetry and culture of the 1840's that began with Hood's poem, which first

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[589]Moris Vintshevski, *Gezamlte verk*, vol. 2 (Yiddish) (New York: Frayheyt, 1927), 23.

[590]Compare the opening lines to the original English version "Song of the Shirt" by Thomas Hood (1843). Vintshevski combined Hood's first stanza and its refrain with the ending of Hood's fourth stanza. Hood's first stanza read as follows:

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread –
Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang 'The Song of the Shirt!
The ending of Hood's fourth stanza match with Vinchevky's ending of the first:
Stitch--stitch--stitch,
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A Shroud as well as a Shirt.
(Thomas Hood, "The Song of the Shirt", Punch 5 (16 December 1843), 260).

portrayed the pitiable figure of the "solitary seamstress". Peretz in his poem portrayed three such solitary seamstresses. As Patricia Zakreski shows, in English culture this figure became the embodiment of the passive victim of the economic forces of capitalism. And like Peretz's portrayal of the knitters' longing for matrimony in "*Dray neytorins*", this is a figure of the vulnerable and helpless women in the public domain, "a perfect example of a modest and reluctant worker who can be unproblematicly pitied." And furthermore, "her qualities of moral purity and feminine modesty made her a safe and convenient figure throughout the 1840's for charitable appeals to the middle class."[591] "Pithiness" as opposed to "social struggle" is present in the poem not only as expressions of the characters, but also by the poem's narrative structure. By portraying a process of decay and degeneration rather than an element of opposition, or other outlet as the poem progresses from one seamstress, to the second, and to the third, Peretz neatly reinforces this message. Thus, the charitable pithiness and the centrality of the institution of marriage make Peretz's poem "*Dray neytorins*" in the last analysis an apolitical poem. It is doubtful that this poem would have had any political effect on its readers. Clearly, it did not send a rousing Socialist message. Zakreski touches on this point, writing:

> Middle-class audiences could feel sorry for the seamstress or might contribute to a philanthropic organization,… but in the course of such objectification she was reduced to a symbol of working-class vulnerability that was convenient for reformers who thought women and the working classes unable to help themselves. The middle classes could help if they chose, but the difficulties of the seamstress did not appear in the end to affect them directly.[592]

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[591]Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006) 26-27. And see also Shakne Epshteyn's comment, pointing to the fact that the female workers in *Baym fremdn khupe kleyd* are not as downtrodden and depressed as the knitters in *Dray neytorins* (Epshteyn, "Yitskhok Leybush Perets: tsum finf-un-tsvanstikstn yortog nokh zayn toyt," 101).

[592]Ibid, 32. Already in 1891 Oscar Wilde wrote that charity is a way of trying of solving "the problem of poverty… by keeping the poor alive… it is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible…", while "charity degrades and

Thus the poem "*Dray neytorins*" is written from a middle-class prospective with a middle-class readership in mind. It is not the only example in which the poetry of Peretz's radical years fails to express the revolutionary potential of the poor. A poem Peretz wrote by the name "*Oysgeshtorbn*" ("Extinct") that was published in the New York publication *Arbeter-Tsaytung* in 1894, laid forth the notion of the decline of generations over time.[593] The speaker in the poem yearns for heroes he could use as models in his art, but argues that today they are all extinct. A devout and well formed Marxist-socialist such as Vintshevski felt he had to counter what he viewed as Peretz's sentimentality in "Extinct", and instead offer up the working-class as the obvious heroic subject of the era. He addresses Peretz in the poem as the "writer of Monish":

> You complain that the world today,
> Is altogether corrupt,
> That every hero is already
> Entirely extinct?!
> {…}
> You will find masses
> Of heroes amongst the working-people,
> Who serenely sacrifice themselves
> In this battle[594]

This simplistic poem by Vintshevski may have had an effect on Peretz. Most of Peretz's truly socialist poetry, as in "*Baym fremdn khupe kleyd*", appeared during the second year of the *Bletlekh*. When he did so, he also modernized the means of artistic creation, introducing new forms and styles into Yiddish literature. The mixture of styles, the usage of symbolist techniques, the polyphonies – are examples that although Peretz's poetry still can not be categorized as modernist, he did incorporate modernist elements in his poetry.

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demoralises." (Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," *The Fortnightly Review* {February 1, 1891}); also quoted in Slavoj Zizek, *Living in the End of Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 117-118.

[593]This is also the central motif of his Yiddish short story "Four generations, four wills"(1901), which associated upward mobility with assimilation, decline, and mental illness.

[594]For a reprint of both poems, see: Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 169-171.

Collecting "Jewish Folklore"

Besides the purely socialist poems, many poems in the *Bletlekh* consist of "national-rejuvenation" motifs and the struggle for national-freedom. Poems like "*Treyst mayn folk*" ("Take Comfort my People") and "*Friling*" ("Spring") describe the "sleepy people" that needs to be woken up ("my people are lazy and still,\ Have not awoken yet, no!"). Despite their popularity in the past,[595] today these works have lost their relevance. At the time when these poems were written, despite their nationalist tone, these poems did not necessarily contradict the ideal of universal social justice. Given the progressive outlet in which they were published, these Yiddish poems had the potential of serving as a tool of empowerment for the Jewish working class in Eastern Europe, (the *ethno-class fraction*), which was represented politically by the Bund. In other words, these works were progressive in the sense that they fostered a sense of imagined-community amongst an underprivileged marginalized group.

Since the mid 1890's Peretz was busy collecting folksongs, acting as a pioneer in this field of "Jewish folklore". He gathered the material during the years 1894-5 and by 1896 he had a collection of Yiddish folksongs which he meant to publish as a supplement to the *Yontef bletlekh*. It is believed that some of the poems, but it is not clear which, are actually Peretz's adaptations of songs he heard or read.[596] Many of these songs deal with issues of love, themes which Peretz, as we know, had previously questioned the ability to be adequately expressed

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[595]As evidence to their past popularity is the fact that both these poems, as well as others of their kind by Peretz, were set to music and were widely sung. Both "*Friling*" and "*Treyst mayn folk*" were included in an anthology of Yiddish poetry released in 1974, a testament to their ongoing popularity in Yiddish secular circles (see Mlotek, *Perl fun der yidisher poezye*, 65-79). "*Treyst mayn folk*" also became the title for a popular biography of Peretz in Yiddish by Mark Schweid, published in 1955. Arguably *folk* in this case, and we've seen before with the term *folks-bildung*, meaning *dos proste folk*, the common Jewish people, the populace, as opposed to the "Jewish people" as a whole.

[596]These poems were published as a whole for the first time in 2003 by Khane Mlotek. See: Gordon-Mlotek, "Y.L. Perets' zamlung yidishe folkslider," 9–70.

in the Yiddish language. A handful of these poems are variations on similar themes: some tell the story of an innocent young woman who is drowned in the river by her seducer; others are about the life of a Jewish soldier in the Russian army; others represent a selection of stories of failed love. Some of these poems have known writers (Peretz was not a professional folklorist and he did not strictly follow the conventional understanding of folk-songs as being composed by anonymous writers and belonging to a group of people), and some poems Peretz reworked and incorporated in his Yiddish cycle of love poems entitled *Romantsero*.[597]

In any case, the combination of folksongs and socialism, so typical of the *Bletlekh*, perfectly illustrates Peretz's attraction to the Jewish labor movement at the time and the role he played as the cultural agent of the Jewish working class. One can learn from this collection about Peretz's desire to find inspiration for his own work in this material, which he believed embodied a "Jewish life" to be cherished.[598] Peretz was a pioneer in this field. Starting from "Monish", he employed folkloristic elements in his work, viewing folklore, in Miron's words, as "a deep well of symbolic truth, to be interpreted by the modern artist and adapted to the spiritual needs of the modern Jew."[599] But, as Jameson points out, folktales tend to voice a silenced, counter-hegemonic sentiment, which is by definition missing from the cultural monuments that have survived,[600] and which would be lost if not for the work of the collectors. An assembler like Peretz plays a crucial role in this process, because without his praxis of "restoration or artificial reconstruction" of these marginalized Yiddish voices, they

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[597]Ibid, 62-70.

[598]See the title of a long Yiddish article by Peretz published in 1901 "Jewish life according to Yiddish folksongs" ("Dos yidishe lebn loyt di yidishe folkslider").

[599]Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 80. See also n20.

[600]Quoted in: José Limón, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 156.

would be absent from the dialogue of the class system.[601] Discredited by many *maskilm* as superstitions to be forgotten,[602] the meaning of his Yiddish folklore works starting with "Monish" and continuing with collecting "authentic" creations by others, increased the symbolic capital of Yiddish, mostly vis-a-vis Hebrew literature.[603]

The long Yiddish poem "*R' Yosl*" ("Mr. Yossel"), published in 1895 in the third volume of *Di yidishe bibliyotek* is, like *Monish*, infused with larger doses of "Jewish folklore". Both poems incorporate various rhyme schemes and rhythms and center on a traditional protagonist who is well versed in the *sforim* (i.e. traditional Jewish literature) but who is less in touch with earthly affairs. Peretz criticizes this character for his lack of worldliness, just as he criticized the Jewish intelligentsia for being detached from the people.[604] In this poem the traditional character is a *melamed* who is immersed in his studies and "sitting from afar… this *shtetl* is not his, he wants to know of nothing\ And study constantly his traditional book."[605] Together with a pupil of his, Khaymel the orphan whom he shelters, R' Yosel lives in the attic of R' Gavriel and his wife Tsipe. R' Gavriel is a shoemaker by day and security guard by night.

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[601]Idem.

[602]See: Mikhail Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 172-177. And: Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

[603]The Hebrew story by Peretz "In a Summer House", and stories by Ben-Avigdor and others from the Hebrew New Wave, were an attempt to counter this symbolic value obtained for Yiddish (see third chapter).

[604]Meaning: the *shtetl*-Jews; see first chapter.

[605]Ale verk, vol 1, 156.

Peretz expands the "demonic" motif in this poem relative to *Monish*; it includes the *danse-macabre* motif that Peretz will go back to several times more in his later work.[606] And we find here an open declaration that this poem is a kind of an archival-assembly of Jewish folklore. Towards the end of the first section, R' Yosl the *melamed* gives his students a vivid and detailed description of the wrath of hell in order to keep them on the right path.

Before Peretz, in Haskalah literature, the *melamed* was always described as an ignorant and coarse man;[607] Peretz stretches this literary-type to its extreme up to the point of creating a parody of that figure. This authority-figure, with all his cruelty, is an essential literary-type of the newly termed "Jewish folklore"; he is a carrier, who passes on a slice of "Jewish culture" through the generations. The last stanza of this section clearly states, in R' Yosl's frightening voice, the significance of folklore:

> *And fire, and flames, and auto-da-fés,*
> *And everything, which a Jew saw in exile*
> *And has laid in the hell-archive, -*
> *Everything he distributes, the awful things*
> *For improper touch, for speaking, for naughtiness, for laughing,*
> *And according to the most severe tariff! (Ale verk, vol 1, 159)*

This "hell-archive", is a kind of a self-parody of what Diaspora *folkists* like Peretz tried to establish: the business of accumulating documentation of all aspects of "Jewish life" in the Diaspora, thus creating a "people's library". Assembling the documented history of Jews, meaning humorously here the history of the persecution of Jews, is termed in this stanza as a kind of devil's work. In this way Peretz parodies an imagined-utopian space in which such an

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[606] And that was popular in other works like S. Ansky's *Dibbuk.*

[607] Etkes, Immanuel. 2010. Haskalah. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Haskalah (accessed January 22, 2013). See also previous chapter.

archive does exist, a safe place for his poems and folksongs to be kept. Establishing such an institution will ultimately enable the inclusion of Eastern European Jews in the modern European national project.

Khaymel the orphan receives private lessons in misogyny from R' Yosl, who tells him that women are seductive witches, devils in disguise. This lecture is overheard by Tsipe, who tells her husband R' Gavriel what a terrible man R' Yosl is, "he frightens the children… [R' Yosl] is a terrible-creature,\ I would have torn him into pieces out of anger!"(167). And indeed Tsipe will get her revenge. She first tries to convince her husband (who tends at first to take R' Yosl's side in patriarchal solidarity), that she means business and that her "Torah-words" are of no less symbolic-worth than R' Yosl's and of men in general. Her education is based on the *Tsene-Rene* book (169), the very popular compellation of adaptations of the weekly Torah portions that was written in Yiddish, mainly for women who generally were not taught to read Hebrew. It included occasional discussions of the ethical implications of the original texts, and it played a very important role in disseminating knowledge of the Bible and its commentaries throughout Eastern-Europe.[608] "*Toyre is toyre, tsi di, tsi yene…*" ("Torah is torah, whether this one or that one…", idem), she tells him. She acquired her skills, she declares, not by reading popular novels in Yiddish (176), but rather from the traditional texts.

Tsipe uses her knowledge to lectur her husband about her view of the famous Torah stories:[609] from the Garden of Eden plot of seduction, and up until the tale of Samson – the

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[608]Elbaum, Jacob, and Turniansky, Chava. 2010. Tsene-rene. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Tsene-rene (accessed January 17, 2013).

[609]These few stanzas and others predate Itsik Manger's famous adaptations of the Torah into Eastern European Jewish life through Yiddish verse in his book "*Khumesh-lider*" ("Pentateuch-Poems). This book was published in 1935 in Warsaw, exactly forty years after the publication of "*R' Yosl*".

ultimate story of the hero who falls at the hand of a woman. In Eastern European Jewish folklore there was the common expression "*der nebekhdiker shimshon*" (the lame Samson), which best describes the protagonist R' Yosl. His nebbish authority relies on his symbolic-capital of knowing Hebrew and being versed in traditional texts, rather than on his monumental physique. The multiple allusions to Samson foreshadows Tsipe's plot to get even with R' Yosl, not because of tribal wars as in the Bible, but rather as part of the social wars between men and women, of the young and orphaned against the patriarchal order embodied by R' Yosl's cruelty and misogyny as well as the passive cooperation he receives from R' Gavriel.

What angered Tsipe so much is the way R' Yosl concluded his "hate-lecture" to the orphaned boy. In his conclusion, he uttered lines that are a variation of the opening stanzas of *Monish*:

״אָ, חיימל הער, איך זאָג דיר נישט מער,

די וועלט – צו וואָס איז זי גליַיך?

די מענטשן - וואָס נישט? – זיי זענען נאָך פֿיש,

זיי שווימען אַרום אין אַ טיַיך...

פֿאַרשטייסט מן-הסתּם, דער פֿישער איז ס״ם,

ער שטייט זיך ביַים טיַיכל, ביַים ברעג,

און לאָזט אָפּ דעם לץ, די אישה – זיַין נעץ...

רחמנא-ליצלן, איז אַן עק!״[610]

"Oh, Khaymel hear, I will tell you no more,
The world – to what is it equal?
The people – what else? – They are still fish,
They are swimming around in a river…

[610]Ale verk, vol 1, 165.

You probably know, the fisherman's the devil,
He stands by the river bank,
And releases the demon, the woman – his net…
Good God, it's the end of it!"

Compare those lines to the opening stanzas of the original *Monish* version:

You probably know –
The world is an ocean, we are fish;
(Some are pikes,
They swallow not bad…
Say, maybe not?)

The world is an ocean,
Endlessly broad;
We are the fish,
The fisherman's the devil[611]

This direct reference to *Monish* inside this later poem is no coincidence. *R' Yosl* is a poem that has never been seriously dealt with, in striking contrast to *Monish*. Rozentsvayg made one short remark about it, stating that "in essence it is a radical variant of *Monish*"[612], but gave no further explanation of how it functions as such. What is striking in comparing the two poems is the radically different roles Peretz assigns to his women figures. In *Monish* the central female figure is a seductive *shikse*-like character who is ultimately a nameless and passive tool sent by the devil to seduce the pious Yeshiva student, and who (like the ideal bourgeois-woman) sings at home as a hobby. But in *R' Yosl*, the female figure has a name: Tsipe, the name of the dark-skinned wife of the greatest Biblical prophet Moses – Zipporah (see Numbers 12:1). Moreover, she belongs to the lower-classes – "I am a tailor's daughter,

[611]Ale verk, vol 1, 3.

[612]Ronzentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 33.

go on laugh,\ My mindset will always be that of a tailor" (169); and she is anything but passive, gentile and unsophisticated, as she plots her Delilah-like payback.

In a kind of a parody on his own *Monish*, Peretz makes R' Yosl convinced that Tsipe wants to seduce him (she promises him hot soup, as her husband is about to leave the house). He prays to God that he not succumb to his sexual desire, "I don't want any temptation" (*nisoyen*), he utters, and claims that he prefers to die rather than have a sexual encounter with her. To strengthen his efforts, he also prays to The Almighty to make her ugly and foul, so as to make it easier for him to resist. He hallucinates that she comes to him as Shulamis – the female protagonist of the Song of Songs, trying to sweet talk him into bed:"*Ikh bin dokh di shenste, a royz tsvishn derner!...\ Mikh meynt ir, nisht kneses-yisro'el!*" ("I am the prettiest of them all, a rose amongst thorns!...\ You mean me, not the Jewish people![613]", 174). In fact, Tsipe used her sharp senses to scheme and to execute her own a plan against R' Yosel. Here plot involved seduction, drugging, and cutting of his "Jewish hair" (his *shpitsn* and *peyes*, meaning the tips of his beard, and his side curls). "Tsipe executes the gag with mercy,\ She smiles and – is holding the shears…" (177). Tsipe embodies the revolutionary potential of the lower-classes, and particularly of the female lower-class Jew. She demonstrates both the capacity for anger as well as the capability of using her anger to motivate her to act for change. The ability to express anger recalls Peretz's short story "The Anger of a Jewish

[613]The traditional interpretation of the Song of Songs relates to the female protagonist as symbolizing the Jewish people (Knesset Yisrael); here the cheeky female protagonist rejects this interpretation in favor of the outright sexual one.

Woman"[614]), but here he takes that theme a step further. Though she supposedly holds a "demonic" power over men, this is ultimately a very positive force.

In *R' Yosl* Peretz echoes, besides his own *Monish*, also an early long Hebrew poem called *Bruria* (1825) by Samuel I. Mulder from Amsterdam, which represented a significant milestone in Hebrew narrative poetry. Unlike the epic poetry of Haskalah masters such as N.H. Wessely (1725-1805), who told the life-story of a biblical character, Mulder's poem is based on various post-biblical sources (from the Talmud to Rashi), and it is not a biography-poem. Instead, Mulder focuses on the battle of the sexes – the debate and intrigue between its three protagonists.[615] In *Bruria* it is the husband, the Mishna-sage Rabbi Meir, who plots against his opinionated and educated wife Bruria following their debate as to whether women are "light-minded". Rabbi Meir sends his beloved pupil Uriah to seduce Bruria, and thus to prove his point regarding the nature of females. The plot centers on this story of seduction, revenge, and sexual desire. Both Mulder and Peretz center their poems on an educated woman, who is debating with her husband while reinterpreting traditional Jewish literature's message about the role of women in society. In *R' Yosl*, Peretz took the strong woman who was plotted against in Mulder's poem, and made her into the one who plots herself against the male figures. Besides writing in Yiddish, Peretz also transferred the plot to a contemporary

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[614]See second chapter. It should be noted that this story was himself a radical variant of a humoristic poem by Peretz, published in 1891 "*Reb Khanine ben Dosa (a talmudishe zage)*". The character of the idle only-studying husband and his complaining wife:"what's it worth for me your Torah…\ I wonder idle with the kids,\ Khanine ben Dosa, give food!" (Ale Verk, vol 1, 38). The kids are hungry and crying here as well, but the poem conveys a sense of cynical humor towards the exploiting husband ("should all my loved ones die here out of hunger,\ and there your chair should not even crack.", 42), rather than the anger and protest of the later story. This poem is indeed a maskilic parody by Peretz of a known Talmudic legend, about the miracle worker Knanina Ben Dosa and his wife, known to be living in poverty, expecting their reward in the afterlife. For more see: D. Kurlyand, "Tsu der frage vegn legendare syuzhetn in Peretses verk," *Sovetishe literatur* (Oct. 1940), 126-128; and David Roskies, "Rabbis, Rebbes, and Other Humanists: The Search for a Usable Past in Modern Yiddish Literature," *Studies in Contemporary* Jewry 12 (1996): 58, 73 n13.

[615]Miron, "Bein takdim le-mikreh — shirato ha-'epit shel Y"L Gordon u-mekomah be-sifrut ha-haskalah ha-ivrit," 172-173.

Eastern European setting. He also made the male figures unimpressive, reducing them to parodies of the legendary sage Rabbi Meir and his pupil of Mulder's poem.

By the end of *R' Yosl*, Peretz loses a great deal of the subversive momentum he built through the poem by making Tsipe totally remorseful over her actions. He thus transforms the poem into a moral play, in which the actual sinner is Tsipe and not R' Yosl. "I've sinned… I know it myself…!" she tells her husband in shame. R' Gavriel does not accept what she has done, but makes her feel awful for it. In the final account, she accepts the social norms set by the men, and totally backs down from the anarchistic impulse she had shown before. Her action made her into a miserable creature, suffering on the psychological level for her attempt to correct society in an "impulsive and irrational" (i.e. feminine) manner. The poem ends with the sadness of the female-protagonist, who even though years have passed since the incident, regrets that she ever launched her war to begin with:"…Tsipe? Who knows?\ Sometimes she pauses to stare,\ And her eyes shed a tear!"(179).

At the end of *Bruria*, both Bruria and Rabbi Meir lose their minds because of their deeds and the speaker ends by giving thanks to the Lord. Miron claims that the big questions raised in *Bruria* regarding the depth of passion and of revenge are not disrupted even by the final God-praising words at the end, which are mostly formal. Peretz's poem does not conclude with reference to any transcendental being, though in his poem R' Gavriel also remains sad for years after the event.

Peretz's ending – despite its similarities to *Bruria*, does not avoid the class-gender war, but it blunts its edginess significantly. While *R' Yosl* is, as Rosentsvayg commented, something of a "radical *Monish*", this story avoids making an overt call for gender revolt. *R' Yosl* does disrupt the rules of discourse, mostly through Tsipe's voice and actions. However in the last

account, the total-regret expressed at the story's end, causes to fall short of meeting the second requirement for political poetry as defined by Hever: it fails to have a political effect on its readers.

Between Marx, Heine, and Peretz

> *The Hebrew prophets seriously influenced me, for a long time I was as you know under the influence of Heine and Boerne – my first Jewish poetry.*

(Peretz in a letter to Y. Tsinberg, 1911)

Eigenthum! Recht des Besitzes!
O des Diebstahls! O der Lüge!
Solch Gemisch von List und Unsinn
Konnte nur der Mensch erfinden. (Heine, *Atta Troll*, 1841-1843)

אָ, דאָס אייגנטום ! חזקה

אויף אַ ליגן, אַ גנבֿה !

אַזאַ שקר, אַזאַ שווינדל

קאָן אויסטראַכטן נאָר אַ מענטש !

("Oh, property! Claiming a right\ To a lie, a theft!\ Such a lie, such a deceit\ only a human being can come up with!", Peretz's translation of *Atta Troll* into Yiddish, 1894)

According to his own account, the cultural baggage Peretz carried included the German poet of Jewish descent, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Heine not only heavily influenced Peretz as a poet as frequently noted by his readers and interpreters, but Heine also bequeathed his view of Marx and the socialist movement, and as a writer of edgy feuilletons.

The great influence of Heine on Peretz's poetry is widely acknowledged, especially the influence of Heine's love poetry.[616] In fact it was Peretz's "The Organ" that sparked the debate

[616]See for example: *The Jewish Reception of Heinrich Heine*, ed. Mark H. Gelber (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1992), 71-72.

in the second half of the 1890's over Heine's place in Hebrew literature.[617] Peretz borrowed the title "*Romanzero*" for his own Yiddish poem cycle from Heine. He translated Heine's poem "An Edom" into Yiddish for his second volume of *Di yidishe bibliyotek*, which sarcastically deals with Jewish-Christian relation from the point of view of a Jew. He borrowed an epigraph from Heine – "*Es ist eine alte Geschichte,\ Doch bleibt sie immer neu*"[618] – for another of his Yiddish poems from the same period, "*Er un zi*" (1891), which was added in a Rashi type script – to give it extra respectability and authority. In the same almanac in which he published his translation of *Atta Troll*, he also published a dramatic-poetic Yiddish text entitled "A Scene (from Heine)". Even in his early poetry in Polish he showed a few signs of a Heine's influence.[619] And recently, the scholar Leah Garrett has shown how Peretz adapted Wagner's musical version of the Germanic myth Tannhäuser into a Yiddish short story entitled "Self-Sacrifice" ("Mesires-nefesh", 1904). Peretz Judaized the plot, and turned it into a story about Jewish learning and Jewish life. Heine's 1836 poem "*Der Tannhäuser*" predated the adaptations by Wagner and Peretz. While Heine used the myth in order to politically satirize Germany, Peretz emphasized the redemptive elements of the story, transforming it from a Catholic redemption into a story of Jewish redemption.[620]

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[617]Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Zionist Remaking of Literary Space*, 61-62.

[618]"It is an old story,\ But it remains always new;". It is taken from the final lines of Heine's poem *Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen*. See *Di yudishe bibliyotek* 2, 170. This same stanza, including its last two sentences "Und wem sie just passieret, / Dem bricht das Herz entzwei ("And to whom it just happened,/ His heart breaks in two."), is also quoted by David Frishman in his battles against "plagiarism" in Hebrew literature; and also by Klausner and Moshe Leib Lilienblum to argue whether love poetry has a place in Hebrew literature (Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Zionist Remaking of Literary Space*, 62-64).

[619]Weynig, "Poylishe lider fun Y. L. Perez fun yor 1874," 192-193.

[620]For more on the topic, see Leah Garrett, *A Knight at the Opera:* Heine, *Wagner,* Herzl, Peretz, *and the Legacy of Der Tannhäuser* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011).

Heine's political influence on Peretz is not often discussed. This omission is strange given the fact that both authors were very involved in the social-political currents and issues of their time. Heine knew the young Marx personally when they were both in Paris, and was exposed directly to his evolving mindset. Heine also extensively discussed various socialist platforms and thinkers in his journalistic writings. In Germany, Heine was considered to be a radical poet and a dissident because of his frequent criticism of what he viewed as the militaristic nationalist culture that was sweeping away his beloved homeland. Heine was a cultural hero not only to Peretz, but to many Europeans of Jewish descent, including Theodore Herzl, Peretz's parallel in the Zionist movement,[621] as more and more Jews were included into the European middle and upper-classes. Heine made numerous comments about his Jewish background; he wrote the famous "Hebrew Melodies" cycle, and an unfinished Jewish novel "The Rabbi from Bacharach".

To what extent was Heine himself a radical writer?

One of Heine's most celebrated satirical political poems was *Germany, A Winter's Tale* (*Deutschland ein Wintermaerchen*), published in 1844. It is written in a four-stanza style of folk-poetry, a style which Peretz also embraced. It also included a subversive usage of (Germanic) folkloric material in order to promote progressive ideas. Peretz' used folklore, as Heine did, to make subversive statements against the ruling norms of the society,[622] poking fun at German nationalism while calling for an end to poverty – "Down here enough bread

[621]Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Creation of Modern Jewish Culture*, xiii.

[622]See next chapter and Peretz's usage of Hasidic motifs in his writings; and the discussion in this chapter regarding the employment of Jewish folklore in his poetry.

grows\ For all mankind."[623] The poem's speaker remembers the comment made by the French revolutionary Saint-Just that the sickness of society demands a stronger medicine than rose water. And all in all, like Peretz's *Yontef bletlekh*, it was the most radical text Heine was able to release under restrictions imposed by censorship.[624]

Germany, A Winter's Tale was a sequel to his former *Atta Troll, A Midsummer's Night Dream*. The stanza above borrows the title of a book by the French "utopian socialist" Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1856), *What is Property? Theft!* (1840; 1844 in German). Proudhon's book put forth the argument that property is gained only through exploitation, and exploitation only can be eliminated giving each worker the means of production and through organizing the trades, not by the state, as was Marx's platform, placing Proudhon's philosophy squarely in the anarchistic tradition.[625] These stanzas translated directly from German reads, in the voice of the bear called Atta Troll, the protagonist of the poem:

> *Property! Possessors' rights!*
> *O such thievery – saucy lies!*
> *Mingling such of cunning, nonsense,*
> *As only man could have invented.*

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[623]Canto I, 281. Quoted also in: Shlomo Barer, "Heine and Marx: The Relationship between the Prophet of Communism and the Poet Who Foresaw its Horrors,"(Hebrew) in *Marx and the Future of Socialism*, ed. Uri Zilbersheid (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 168, 170. On whether the poem expresses any definite commitment to revolution there have been many debates. For the view which negates such a commitment in the poem, see Shlomo Barer, *The Doctors of Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 899 n14; for the opposite view see Hans Kaufmann, *Politische Gedicht und klassische Dichtung: Heinrich Heine, Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* (German) (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1959), 120-122.

[624]Barer, "Heine and Marx," 171-172.

[625]Jochanan Trilse-Finkelstein, *Heinrich* Heine*: Gelebter* Widerspruch*: Eine* Biographie (Berlin: Aufbau, 2001), 223-224. Proudhon was in fact the first to declare himself an anarchist, in the meaning of holding a defined social-political theory; he rejected any form of centralism, and thus he criticized the national movements fighting to establish centralized nation states (see: *Anarchism – Anthology*, ed Avraham Yassour (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008}, 33-56). In his 1908 speech at the Czernowitz Yiddish language conference, Peretz expressed the view that all states are coercive and culturally reductive (See: Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 80).

A pocket! Unnatural
As the property,
As the rights of possession -
People are born pocketless![626]

Peretz translated this part, making it very Yiddish, with no fewer than five Yiddish words of Hebrew origin[627] – and several others from *Atta Troll*, to include them in his essay *Dos eygentum* (Property, 1894[628]). This essay was mostly devoted to arguing with Atta Troll, who speaks Proudhon's words, saying that property is not a human invention; that property exists in nature as well, as in the case of marsupials and camels. He ends the essay with a promise to tell the history of property among people.[629] Unfortunately that promise, which would have helped us better understand Peretz's views, never was fulfilled.

In several of his writings over the years, Heine expressed an ambiguous stance towards a proletarian revolution. On the one hand he was seriously contemplating the revolutionary option. Marx's influence on Heine is clearly seen for example in the poem *Die schlesischen Weber* (The Schlesian Weavers), which was published in Marx's journal *Vorwaerts!* in 1844, portraying the first German workers' uprising.[630] Such a poem surely influenced Peretz

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[626]*Atta Troll*, Canto X. Quoted in Frederic, Ewen, "A half-century of greatness: the creative imagination of Europe, 1848-1884," ed. by Jeffrey Wollock (New York University, 2008), 365. Peretz's translation of the second stanza goes: "*Keyn shum kinyen hot bashafn\ Di natur, vayl on tashn\ In di peltsn kumen ale,\ Ale bruim af der velt!*".

[627]These words are: *khazoke* (none), *gneyve* (theft), *sheker* (lie), *shum*, *bruim* (creatures).

[628]Printed in his almanac *Literatur un lebn*, which came out before the *Yontef bletlekh*; a shortened version was reprinted in: Rosentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 161-163.

[629]Ibid, 163.

[630]Barer, "Heine and Marx," 168-170.

thematically, as we saw in his poems and stories concerning weavers and knitters, as well as by its radical spirit.[631]

On the other hand, at the same time Heine expressed fear in his writings regarding the possibility of full realization of the communist platform in the future. In the French edition of "*Lutetia*" (1855) he wrote:

> *This confession, that the future belongs to the Communists, I made with an undertone of the greatest fear and anxiety and, oh!, this tone by no means is a mask! Indeed, with fear and terror I imagine the time, when those dark iconoclasts come to power: with their raw fists they will batter all marble images of my beloved world of art, they will ruin all those fantastic anecdotes that the poets loved so much, they will chop down my Laurel forests and plant potatoes and, oh!, the herbs chandler will use my Buch der Lieder to make bags for coffee and snuff for the old women of the future – oh!, I can foresee all this and I feel deeply sorry thinking of this decline threatening my poetry and the old world order – And yet, I freely confess, the same thoughts have a magical appeal upon my soul which I cannot resist {....} I cannot object to the premise "that all people have the right to eat"....*[632]

Heine called for justice in this text, for the destruction of the old world based on egoism, where one man exploits the other.[633] But he also expressed in this text fears of radical change that would completely abolish this world, including the things he cared deeply about, including culture and esthetics. Heine's fear of a socialist revolution also influenced Nietzsche, though the latter was far from any ambiguous stand on the matter (i.e., he was in strict opposition to the socialist utopia and viewed it as complete mediocrity).

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[631]It is very ironic that of all people it was Peretz's nemesis, the Hebrew and Yiddish writer David Frishman, who translated this socialist poem by Heine into Yiddish. The same Frishman who attacked Peretz vehemently in the mid 1890's for allegedly plagiarizing Heine's poetry (see his seventh letter in his *Mikhtavim 'al hasifrut: sefer alef*, 100-146). Frishman himself never flirted with radical politics, never delved into Jewish nationalism either, and remained a European liberal to his last day (see his essay about the poetry of Rosa Luxemburg).

[632]*Heinrich Heines Samtliche* Werke. Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Ernst Elster. Kritisch durchgesehene und erlauterte Ausgabe. Leipzig und Wien. Bibliographisches Institut, 1887-1890. 7 Bde. Reprint with revisions in 1893, vol VI, pp. 572-573.

[633]Idem; see also Barer, "Heine and Marx," 173.

Nietzsche himself wrote about the great influence Heine's language has had on him, and some critics see Heine as anticipating Nietzsche in certain ways.[634] Nietzsche was also starting to influence Peretz and other modern Jewish thinkers by the 1890's, in particular he was heavily influential on the Peretz's work in folk-stories and Hasidic tales.[635]

One can find very similar ponderings to Heine's in Peretz's writings, especially in light of the 1905 revolution. Peretz wrote an article in 1906 in Yiddish entitled "Hope and Fear" (*Hofenung un shrek*), in which he puts forth an ambiguous stance towards the vision of social revolution which echoes strongly that of Heine.

Wisse writes that in "Hope and Fear" Peretz is rejecting socialism all together.[636] But in fact, Peretz writes clearly that his heart is with the socialists. He addresses them saying – "I want, I hope for your victory, but", he continues, "I fear and I tremble by your victory." And in another part he writes: "Cruelly will you defend the equal-entitlement of your herd to the grass under its feet and to the roof over its head, and your enemies will be free individuals, overmen (*Übermenschn*), genius inventors, prophets, redeemers, poets and artists…"[637]

Not without reason, Heine and Peretz are linked in a 1943 article by the pro-Soviet essayist Alexander Pomerantz (1901-1965). In his apologetic piece, the essay's title "Heine and Peretz Feared and Doubted for Nothing,"[638] is repeated after each time Pomerantz makes an

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[634]George F. Peters, The Poet as Provocateur*:* Heinrich Heine and His Critics (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 101-102.

[635]See more in the next chapter regarding Nietzsche's influence on Peretz's Hasidic writing.

[636]Wisse, *I. L. Peretz*, 55.

[637]Perets, *Ale verk*, vol 8, 226-229.

[638]A. Pomerants, *Kavkaz* (Yiddish) (New York: 1943), 75-92.

argument disproving the pair's predictions concerning the dismal fate of art and the individual spirit under a socialist regime. Pomerantz first identifies the similarity between the two authors by stating that "both were contradictory poets because of the contradictory situation of the petit bourgeois between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie."(76). He then goes on to prove how in the socialist Soviet Union art and artists are aligned with the masses, and thus enjoy an unprecedented cultural renaissance. In this state, Heine and Peretz receive the highest honors; the Olympic Games are played – including an orchestra which plays the Tannhäuser march (92). And the bottom line remains at the end: "Heine and Peretz feared and doubted for nothing". (ibid).

Pomerantz's essay was published in the United States as part of a book commemorating 25 years of the Soviet Union with the express goal of improving the understanding between American Jews and Soviet Jews. Boasting an impressive photo of Stalin on page 6, it aimed to prove to progressive Jews in the West that their cultural heroes, had they lived to see the Soviet state, would have become huge fans of that state and widely celebrated within it. In retrospect of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The yearning of Peretz and Heine for socialism in the true sense, one which enhances freedom in the deep sense rather than restricts it, remains unfulfilled. Neither of them ever doubted the deep moral value basis of communism.

But even with all his doubts regarding the implementation of revolution and the socialist platform that became so apparent in his later years, Peretz published one of his most radical poems during his so-called "reactionary period,"[639] namely the Yiddish poem "*Meyn nisht*" (Do not Think). The poem speaks in an authoritative prophetic language and warns the

[639]According to the Soviet critic Rozentsvayg. See: Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 97-103.

“haves” that their time is up and that they will have to face the wrath of the “have-nots”. This is the original poem followed by an English translation:

מיין נישט, די וועלט איז אַ קרעטשמע -

באַשאַפֿן צו מאַכן אַ וועג מיט פֿויסטן און נעגל

צום שענקפֿאַס, און פֿרעסן און זויפֿן, וועו אַנדערע

קוקן פֿון וויַיטן מיט גלעזערנע אויגן

פֿאַרחלשט, און שלינגען דאָס שפּײַעכץ און ציען צוזאַמען דעם מאָגן, וואָס וואַרפֿט זיך אין קרעמפֿן !

אָ, מיין נישט די וועלט איז אַ קרעטשמע !

מיין נישט די וועלט איז אַ בערזע - באַשאַפֿן

דער שטאַרקער זאָל האַנדלען מיט מידע און שוואַכע,

זאָל קויפֿן ביַי אָרעמע מיידלעך די בושה,

ביַי פֿרויען די מילך פֿון די בריסטן, ביַי מענער

דעם מאַרך פֿון די ביינער, ביַי קינדער דעם שמייכל, דעם זעלטענעם גאַסט אויפֿן וואַקסענעם פּנים - -

אָ, מיין נישט די וועלט איז אַ בערזע !

מיין נישט די וועלט איז אַ הפֿקר - באַשאַפֿן

פֿאַר וועלף און פֿאַר פֿוקסן, פֿאַר רויב און פֿאַר שווינדל ;

דער הימל - אַפֿאָרהאַנג אַז גאָט זאָל נישט זען ;

דער נעפּל - מען זאָל אויף די הענט דיר נישט קוקן ;

דער ווינט - צו פֿאַרשטיקן די ווילדע געשרייַען ;

די ערד איַינצוזאַפֿן דאָס בלוט פֿון קרבנות -

אָ, מיין נישט די וועלט איז אַ הפֿקר !

די וועלט איז קיין קרעטשמע, קיין בערזע, קיין הפֿקר !

געמאָסטן וועט אַלעס, געוויגן וועט אַלעס !

קיין טרער און קיין בלוטיקער טראָפֿן פֿאַרגייען.

אומזיסט וועלט קיין פֿונק אין קיין אויג נישט פֿאַרלאָשן !

פֿון טרערן וועלט טיַכן, פֿון טיַכן וועלט ימען,

פֿון ימען אַ מבול, פֿון פֿונקען - אַ דונער -

אָ, מיין נישט לית דין ולית דיין !

(Ale verk, vol 1, 268)

Do Not Think

Do not think the world is a tavern –

Created so you can make a way for yourself with your fists and your nails

To the tavern-barrel, and gorge and booze, when others

Are looking from afar with glassy eyes,

Fainting, and swallowing their spit and pulling together their bellies, quivering with cramps!

Oh, do not think the world is a tavern!

Do not think the world is a stock market – created

So the stronger could deal with the tired and weak,

Could buy from poor girls their shame

From women the milk from their breasts, from men

Their bone marrow, from children their smiles, that rare guest on their growing faces - -

Oh, do not think, the world is a stock market!

Do not think the world is lawlessness – created

For wolves and for foxes, for theft and for deceit;

Its sky – a curtain so God should not see;

Its fog – so people cannot look at your hands;

Its wind – to smother the wild cries;

Its land is to absorb the blood of victims –

Oh, do not think the world is lawlessness!

The world is neither a tavern, nor a stock market, nor lawlessness!

Everything measured, everything weighed!

No tear and no blood drop are fading.

No spark in an eye is extinguished for nothing!

Tears become rivers, rivers become oceans,

From oceans a flood, from sparks – thunder –

Oh, do not think there is neither law nor judge!

This poem is Peretz's strongest response to the failed 1905 revolution. Clearly, it conveys the message that the fight isn't over yet. The tavern, stock market, and lawlessness parallel each other, collectively representing the social foundations of this world. They are accompanied by the anaphoric warning ("Do not think the world is…") that relates to the temporality of the current social order. The use of exclamation points and the lack of rhyming intensify the severity of the message. The poem anticipates the unity of people, and the great force this unity possesses, a force strong enough to create a flood of Biblical dimensions. This unity of revolutionary sparks is a force that no power in the world can withstand. Peretz expresses here the longing for a sense of morality which he believed has been lost in modernity.

In poetry, Peretz makes his point more firmly than he does with any essay raising questions, problems or grievances at that period. These words were sung through the years by the mouths of Jewish socialists, and they express the desire of modern man to live in a world based on morals, on social equality, and on equal justice for all. With these words, writes the Bundist Shlomo Mendlson, "Peretz attacked the world, its order, its culture, its justice, its spiritual dejection, its non-sincerity. The Jewish worker felt that through Peretz's mouth he

could storm the world. This very contest added wings to his mutiny, his rebellion, which the Jewish revolutionary movement, the "Bund", arose in him."[640]

The prophetic-Biblical sense Peretz injects in his political poetry is not dissimilar to the way he used Hasidic motifs in his prose to call for a social revolution, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

[640]Shlomo Mendelson, Zayn lebn *un* shafn (Yiddish) (New-York: Undzer tsayt, 1949), 155.

Chapter 5: Between Liberal Satire and Socialist Roots: Peretz's Hasidic Creations of the 1890's

> *[A proletarian writer] is in fact not limited to* descriptions *"of working people's lives": his field is much broader; it is in fact unlimited. (M. Olgin, 1939)*

> *In any case, those who think that Peretz simply rewrote the homey Hasidic tales are mistaken; that in accepting its content he intended no more than to celebrate its forms. In any case, Peretz's impersonators and followers, who imitated or reiterated the Hasidic story and thus had the naive intention to become through it "sorts of Peretz" were mistaken. On the contrary, Peretz rebuilt the old Hasidic imagery and secularized it, in order to bury it under its own content and issue a call for rebellion. (Dovid Bergelson, 1925)*[641]

Introduction

The militant, early Eastern–European Haskalah literature, produced by masters such as the Galician Joseph Perl (1773–1839), frequently attacked the Hasidic movement. At the time, Hasidism was the most widespread Jewish religious movement in Europe.[642] The early *maskilim* scorned the Hasidim (Hasidic people), for adhering to irrational mystical beliefs, for being tied to the dying feudal social structure, and for numerous other reasons.[643]

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[641]M. Olgin, "Di proletarishe rikhtung in der yidisher literatur," 366; Dovid Bergelson, "*Y. L. Perets un di khsidishe ideologye*," (Yiddish) *Literarishe bleter*, April 10, 1925, 3. Olgin (1878-1939) was a Bundist activist in Eastern Europe, who became in America a communist, editor of the Yiddish communist paper *Frayhat*. Bergelson (1884–1952) was a leftist Yiddish writer, who became pro-Soviet since 1926.

[642]The Hasidic Movement became a mass movement through its ability to adapt to the various institutions and social relationships in the Eastern Europe of its day (e.g. to the great Polish landowners and ruling aristocracy, the *szlachta*, who played the role of a governing oligarchy). This adaptability was key to its phenomenal success in overcoming the challenge of Polish geography and growing throughout the country (Adam Teller, "Hasidism and the Challenge of Geography: The Polish Background to the Spread of the Hasidic Movement," *AJS Review* 30, no. 1 {2006}).

[643]For some examples in Perl's writings see Jeremy Dauber, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

In the early stages of his career Peretz continued this maskilic tradition of satirizing the Hasidic world. One can see it in his very first published work: the poem "*Ha-shutafut*" ("The Partnership", 1875). This poem took aim at the Hasidic Rebbe. Peretz continued to write critiques of the Hasidic movement throughout the 1880's. At this time, the Hasidic movement was still the dominant religious group in Poland, over half a century since the maskilim began to take shots at it. But Peretz's closeness to the labor movement and his attraction to socialism during the mid 1890's led him to develop a more nuanced critique of the popular Hasidic movement and even an appreciation for some of its strengths as he perceived them. This process occurred also under other influences.

While classic Haskalah literature criticized Hasidism for its reliance on superstition and its abuse of divine authority for financial gain, some of Peretz's treatments of the Hasidim can be viewed as a stylized critique of capitalism itself. In particular, Peretz criticizes capitalist elements such as fetishism and commoditization, and he includes a version of the radical-socialist ideas expressed in his urban social-realist stories. His writings during this time can be also viewed as an attempt to synthesize *folkist\nationalist* and socialist ideas in order to create a particular modern Jewish group identity.[644]

2004), 278-280. And see also the new critical edition to Perls most famous satire "Revealer of Secrets": Joseph Perl, *Sefer Megale Temirin*, critically edited and introduced by Jonatan Meir (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2013) (Hebrew).

[644]The very first spurts of a revision of the early-maskilic negativity towards the Hasidic movement can be found in the writings of the maskil Eliezer Zweifel (1815-1888) from the late 1860's\early 1870's called "Shalom al Yisrael" ("Peace upon Israel"). His writings on the subject remained influential even on later figures such as Berditshevsky. See Nicham Ross, *Masoret Ahuva Ve-snu'a: Zehut Yehudit Modernit Ve-ktiva Neo-Khasidit Be-fetakh Hame'a Ha-esrim* (A Beloved Despised Tradition: Modern Jewish Identity and Neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Hebrew) (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010), 44-50.

Peretz's broad, political treatment of social movements goes far beyond the traditional perspective of the Haskalah, which was defined by its close ties to the up-and-coming Jewish bourgeoisie in Europe. In fact, Peretz arguably took an antithetical perspective to that of the Haskalah. Peretz was developing the insight that every social group, class, or force has its progressive and reactionary period, and its corresponding progressive or reactionary potential. This insight led him to try to locate the revolutionary core embedded within the Hasidic movement.[645]

Peretz perceived Hasidism as a folksy mass movement that swept Eastern European Jewry with an agenda of democratizing Jewish traditional knowledge and attending to the needs and concerns of everyday people. His interest in the movement inspired him to create Hasidic stories over a period of years, a project that many scholars associate with the later neo-romantic or so called "reactionary Peretz". In fact, as we shall see, the roots of his Hasidic themes were already apparent in his 1890's work at the very height of his radical period. Nicham Ross wrote extensively about the nationalist, neo-romantic trends that marked the turn of the century neo-Hasidic literature as produced by Peretz, Bedichevsky, Buber, An-sky and others.[646] My analysis does not necessarily dispute this view. Rather, it elaborates on the particular breed of Diaspora Jewish nationalism that was manifested in Peretz's Hasidic stories, and it highlights their radical and class-oriented elements. In particular, I argue that

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[645]The scholar who analyzed the Hasidim vs. Haskalah conflict in terms of class-war was the Marxist historian Raphael Mahler. See his book *Der kamf tsvishn khsides un haskole in Galitsye* (Yiddish) (New York: Yivo, 1942); and in English "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskalah in Galicia," in *YIVO Annual of Social Jewish Research*, Vol. I (1946), pp. 64-85; and *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* ,trans. Eugene Orenstein, Aaron Klein, and Jenny Machlowitz Klein (Philadelphia, 1985).

[646]See Ross, *Masoret Ahuva Ve-snu'a: Zehut Yehudit Modernit Ve-ktiva Neo-Khasidit Be-fetakh Hame'a Ha-esrim*.

this kind of nationalism is bounded within a particular ethnic-class – meaning in this case, the Jewish working class and I show how these stories combined neo-Hasidism with radicalism.

In this chapter, I will examine Peretz's Hasidic stories that danced between satirical mockery with its different targets and forms, and fascination with the traces of revolutionary inspiration he found within the movement. I will do so by closely reading Peretz's texts set in the Hasidic world, which deal with questions of atheism, faith, and social change. The first segment will examine Peretz's early prose efforts, both in Yiddish and in Hebrew, and address his usage of religion and pious figures as themes in his work.

Peretz and Religious Figures: the Beginning

Peretz's first ever publication, was the Hebrew poem "*Ha-shutafut*", an anti-Hasidic maskilic satire.[647] "Life of a Hebrew Poet" (1877) also included a negative portrayal of a Hasidic figure. Peretz's first dealings with a Hasidic figure in prose, occurs in his 1886 Hebrew story "The Kaddish", which also marks his prose debut in Hebrew.[648]

"The Kaddish" is a very simplistic short story; the narrative is structured with a frame story that takes place thirty years after the inner story in which an old man tells a young listener about a man who has just recited the prayer for the dead in his honor. In the inner story, the business oriented wife Esther — who may have been punished for her commercial wisdom cannot fulfill her maternal role. Her role as business woman is inconsistent with the role that European Bourgeois society would assign to a woman. Her sorrow over her barrenness leads

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[647]Published in *Ha-shahar* 5, 1875. See Barzel, *Toldot ha-shirah ha-ʿivrit mi-ḥibat tziyon ʿad yameynu—kerekh alef*, 251, 261.

[648]See Ken Frieden, "Tradition and Innovation: How Peretz Made Literary History," in: *The Enduring Legacy of Yitzchok Leybush Peretz: Proceedings of A Literary and Cultural Symposium*, March 27, 2005 edited by Benny Kraut, 52-53. The story "*Ha-kadish*" itself was published in: *Ha-yom* 1 (1886): 2; and Nigger, *Y.L. Perets*, 130.

to her gradual self destruction. She starves herself, fearing that her husband Reb Yitskhak will leave her because she is barren, as he is allowed to do according to Jewish law. Reb Yitskhak, who actually never had plans of leaving, soon follows her to the next world, but not before he issues his will and gives instructions – to the then young storyteller, about how to carry it out. He turns his house into an institution for the sick and needy (where he dies "amongst his people"), and he orders to send money to the Land of Israel.

The story "The Kaddish" talks about the ability of the "good plutocrat" to trickle down his wealth to the poor sods of his own ethnic group, and be a responsible member of his group. It also imbues the Jewish economy with gender characteristics, assigning the female, Esther, a high level of practical business acumen. The male, Esther's husband Reb Yitskhak, speaks with the Jewish ethical voice and is in charge of distributing the wealth his wife accumulated after her death.

What is most interesting in this story, for this discussion, is the text's depiction of Hasidim. They are first mentioned as the old storyteller is retelling the story of a pre-Hasidic Jewish-Polish (Austro-Hungarian) past, a time that corresponds to the period when the inner story is taking place. In that time and place, Reb Yitskhak and Esther couldn't easily resolve their infertility problem for "then there weren't any Hasidim and people of action to pay barren women a visit (laughter of contempt was spotted on the old man's lips) the habit of amulets and therapeutic oil was not yet widespread"(p.2). Peretz here is repeating the very common Jewish Enlightenment stereotype of the overly sexually active Hasidic Rebbe, who works the miracle of "helping" infertile women become fertile. And if the cynicism wasn't clear enough, the text makes sure the mockery is understood by making the kind of laughter ("*skhok la'ag*") explicit as the old storyteller recounts this line. Also working within a clear historical time line makes the present (i.e., mid 1880's) dominance of Hasidim in Jewish life undeniable.

Towards the end of the story we are told that it is impossible to rebuild the institution for the needy in the present time because "the rich people of the city are great Hasidim but not people of action!"(Ibid). If in the first quote the Hasidim are grouped together with the "people of action" (or "practical men"), in the second quote they are just the opposite. But in any case, there is a clear recognition regarding the dominance of Hasidim in the Jewish community: the Hasidic movement managed to mobilize wealthy Jews into its ranks.[649] This observation should not be mistaken as an example of Peretz's affiliation with Jewish socialism, as Shaked asserts,[650] since Jewish socialism barely existed at the time the story was published and certainly Peretz was not then a socialist. But Shaked is correct in assessing the achievement of Peretz's (pseudo) Hasidic tales "in which he dealt in a different way with many of the same subjects he had already tackled in his sentimental fictions of the ordinary and everyday. Insofar as these works express the author's commitment to the common people, as opposed to people of privilege, and to those of warm of heart and feeling (the Hasidim), as opposed to the legalistic and cerebral *mitnagdim*."[651]

So while in his early Hebrew effort "The Kaddish", Peretz expressed contempt towards Hasidim – as holding the power over the Jewish community but lacking in social consciousness and practical sense – this attitude would shift slightly in his next literary depiction of pious figures.

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[649]A process that later on received another Yiddish literary representation in Sholem Ash's breakthrough novella: *Dos shtetl* (1904).

[650]See Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction*, 27.

[651]Idem.

The story "*Ha-**mekubalim***"[652] ("Kabbalists") debuted in Hebrew in 1891, and its 1894 Yiddish version "*Mekubolim*" (which appeared then in the *Yontef-bletlekh*), was the earliest of his tales that were included in the 1901 selection called "Chassidic".[653] The central motif here is death by purposeful starvation, which appeared in "The Kaddish" with the death of Esther. While in both stories mystical beliefs posses no healing power for the protagonists, the later story "Kabbalists" is not a simple negation of the power of mysticism. Moreover, the Hasidim in the story (Chabad Hasidim according to the Hebrew version) hold very little if any real power over the community (especially in the later Yiddish version). The power of the Hasidim is crumbling alongside the whole social and economic basis of the shtetl. By connecting it to the social-economic reality, Peretz is differs from the early maskilic critics who viewed Hasidim as merely a swindle. Still, Peretz views the power that a charismatic spiritual leader holds over the individual follower can be deadlier than any opium.

The story is the tale of a young Yeshiva-student, the last student of his Yeshiva in a small shtetl, not so different from the ones Peretz depicted in his Yiddish fiction such as *Bilder fun a provints rayze*, which came out at the same year. This student, who receives a name only in the Hebrew version (the satirical Lemekh[654]), under the guidance of this spiritual leader Rebbe Yaakov\Yekl (his name in Hebrew and Yiddish respectively), abstains from eating in order to reach the highest spiritual level, until eventually he drops dead in the middle of the

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[652]"*Hamekubalim*," *Gan perahim* 3 (1891): 83-85; rpt. Kol kitvei Y. L. Peretz, 2A:167- 171. In Yiddish: "*Mekubolim*," *Der tones — shive oser betamuz bletl* (1894);

[653]Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction*, 288.

[654] The name Lemekh appears in the Bible, but in the Jewish Ashkenazi context it came to mean "a man of weak character", or a "good for nothing" (according to Harkavy's dictionary), or just synonymous with stupidity. In Stuchkov's *Treasure of the Yiddish Language* one can find the following illustrative proverb: *gey ikh gikh, tserays ikh di shikh, gey ikh pamelekh, bin ikh a lemekh* ("if I go fast, I tear my shoes, if I go slowly, I am a Lemekh"), says a complaining son-in-law of his father-in-laws comments.

night. Both Hasidic characters in the story — the Rebbe and his pupil — suffer from hunger, but they treat it as "religious fasting". – Only in the more satiric Hebrew version does the fasting also become "a source of blessing" for them.

Although Peretz pokes fun at the beliefs of the pious in "Kabbalists", Perez goes much deeper in exploring the mystical journey and the irrational psyche than he did in "Kaddish". He explores the erroneous sense of idealism that there is in the act of starving oneself. Peretz does so with grounding it in a *materialist interpretation*. He notes that hallucinations can come as a result of extreme hunger, lack of sleep, and poor material-conditions in general.[655] Mystical experiences do not just come to life out of the magical air, or through straight out miracle working, but rather from a particular physical condition. This rationale he spells out clearly and shortly in the Yiddish version:

> *And they both (the Rebbe and his last pupil, A.M.) suffer from hunger from time to time. From little food comes little sleep, of whole nights of no sleep and no food – a desire for Kabbalah!*
> *In either case – if one must be awake whole nights and fast whole days – one should at least make some use of it, it should at least be: fasts with mortifications, it should at least open all the gates of this world with secrets, spirits, and angels! And they are studying Kabbalah for a while now!*[656]

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[655]This point is also emphasized by Wisse, who writes "The material component of spiritual behavior was for Peretz a given, and neither in this early story about Kabbalists nor in his later writings did Peretz waver in his humanistic convictions." (Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 33).

[656]Ale verk, vol 8, 20. These very lines were criticized by the Yiddish and Hebrew writer H.D. Nomberg, in an article he wrote in 1910, as not befitting the elevated style of the rest of the story. They are, according to Nomberg, the rationalist and felitonist Peretz, who snuck into the story. "The rationalist Peretz interprets and puts out on the plate, where the desire for kabbalah stems from – these seven lines are befitting to the story exactly as… well, let's say, as a pair of suspenders to a symphony. The smart reader spills black ink over these seven lines, and he earns a mitzvah: cleaning up a holy place out of a bit of spider webs."(Originally published in *Der fraynt*, "*Der nign: dos bukh "khsidish fun Y.L. Perets*," reprinted in: H.D. Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets* (Buanos-Ayres: Tsentrale farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1946), p. 16. The Hebrew version not only elaborates this part, it also includes some more kabalistic technical terms, such as the differentiation between "*kabala iyunit*" (notional or theoretical kabbalah) and "*kabala ma'asit*" (practical kabbalah). This has to do with the fact that its Hebrew language medium, as is pointed out by Frieden ("Tradition and Innovation", 54-5) is closer to the language of genuine kabalistic texts.

If the Yiddish version clearly belongs to Peretz's radical period of the *Bletlekh* years, it is interesting to compare the interpretive passage quoted above to its first Hebrew version. The latter version came out around the same time that Peretz wrote the *Bildung* essay (1891), Peretz before developing a more socialist point of view. This is how the hunger is dealt with in the Hebrew version:

> *The Rebbe and his student discussed: what should they do against the bitter and annoying hunger, and they examined the matter and decided: to immerse themselves in theoretical and practical kabbalah, and so they did, and the fasting became a source of blessing for them!*
> *Through the gates of practical kabbalah they have not yet passed, but the theoretical came to them as water that was filled by the respect they received from the entire shtetl, and to their dry bones it was as oil. Both kabbalists, the Rebbe and the student, acquired a name for themselves across the town and its nearby towns and all the people who arrived at the gates of the town waited eagerly until the end would come! Not the end of messiah, when the son of David himself will come, tomorrow, and for that nobody in town would lift a finger, but the end of theoretical kabbalah is the beginning of the practical, and then great wonders and extraordinary things – all of which the generation of Reb Leyb Sore's foresaw!*[657]

As expected, this passage from the early-version is more maskilic in its tone than that from the later Yiddish version, a fact underscored by the high style, festive Hebrew in which it is written, in contrast to the worldly Yiddish of the later version. It shows less compassion towards the poor people of the shtetl and seeks more to unify them into a stereotypical, stupid group that passively expects miracles to happen. Making the poor seem dumb (also see note 11 regarding the student's name in the Hebrew version), goes against the radical grain of seeing the revolutionary potential of the poor. Hence this kind of passage needed to be severely changed (if not almost entirely omitted), in order to fit the more socially oriented leftist point of view which Peretz held by the mid 1890's.

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[657] Peretz, "*Ha-mekubalim*", 83.

As Frieden points out, "Kabbalists" contains both "irony and satire at the expense of the Rebbe" and he uses the term "hostile parody" to describe it. But Frieden also writes that the story "points the way to a more balanced portrayal" of pious figures, paving the way for Peretz's later Hasidic stories.[658] This duality is also reflected in the various reader responses to this story that Rozentsvayg mentions. Rozentsvayg divides these responses between those of the "radical readers" (who emphasized the satirical aspect of the story) and "the Yiddishists in the reactionary period", who focused on the romantic tendencies in it.[659] To give an example of a radical reader's response, the following interpretation is one the Bundist A. Litvak, heard from the socialist Yiddish activist Avraham Amsterdam, while they were serving time together in neighboring cells in a political prison in Vilnius. Amsterdam said these words to Litvak through a mouse hole in the floor of the prison cell:

> *Only here in prison, where there is so much time to think, I understood the deep meaning of Peretz's "Kabbalists". The hunger brings individuals and peoples to hallucinations, to visions, to prophecy. Out of suffering one becomes a kabalist mystic. When there isn't this world, one creates for himself a beautiful world to come.*[660]

This testimony, based on the reading of the story's Yiddish version, supports the argument that Peretz sharpened the materialist analysis of the mystical journey in the Yiddish version. This move made it more appealing to the radical reader's taste and expectations. It also shows how Peretz successfully depicted the world of the pious as *sheyn* (beautiful, lovely), marking a sharp turn away from the sharp maskilic contempt for all things Hasidic. Particularly in the

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[658]Frieden, *Tradition and Innovation*, 54-55.

[659] Ronzetsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 82.

[660]Litvak, *Vos geven*, 81. Litvak also writes how little noticed Peretz's first Hasidic story — meaning here the second Yiddish version of "Kabbalists" which appeared in a *Yontef bletl* "*Der tones*"(The Fast) – was amongst the radical milieu. He writes that he himself actually liked it when it came out, "but it surprised me", he writes, "since what connection does it have with the rest {i.e., of the radical material in that *Bletl*. A.M.}?" (Ibid, 80-1).

last segment, we see, as Amsterdam observed, Peretz's early fascination with the prophetic power of the idealist individual figure.

The last segment of the story focuses on the student's mystical journey, the one which was materialistically grounded earlier in the story. In both the Hebrew and the Yiddish versions, there is a desire to portray the student's experience in an emotionally honest way. As much as the Rebbe's teachings are put into question, there is no doubt that the young student is an idealist who is eager to learn and to practice what he learns. The student continued his fast after breaking (in his view) the "Thou shall not covet" commandment when he stared at his teacher's food before receiving his own portion, when both men were receiving charity meals from the community.

There is no doubt, in Peretz's mind, that given the right guidance and influence, young Jews like the student would be able to devote themselves to a progressive agenda. This last notion is comforting in a story that is essentially about hunger and death; and it provides satisfaction for the radical reader seeking to mobilize the young poor Jews out of the shtetl into their urban ranks. This notion also allows Peretz to discuss the responsibilities of the individual leader over those young Jews.

In the story, the Rebbe teaches his students about the different spiritual levels of *nigunim* (melodic chants). The highest one of all is the one without words or humming, or moving of the lips – the one that exists purely in the heart. After a few days with no food, the student wakes his Rebbe up in the middle of the night and tells him, in the Yiddish version:

> *Rebbe – Rebbe! He called with a weak voice –*
> *What's the matter? The head of the yeshiva woke up frightened.*
> *I was now in the highest level…*
> *How? Asks the head of the yeshiva still a bit sleepy.*

It sang in me!

The head of the yeshiva sat himself up:

How? How?

I don't know myself, Rebbe – the student answered with even a weaker voice, I couldn't sleep, so I steeped myself in what you said… I really wanted to know this nign *(melody), I began to cry… everything in me wept; all of my organs wept for The Master of the Universe!*

I made the combinations, which you entrusted in me… a wonderful thing: not with my mouth, but something inside… of its own self! Suddenly it lit for me… I held my eyes shut, and it was lighted for me, very lighted, very strongly lighted!...

There! The head of the yeshiva tilts himself closer.

Afterwards I felt so good from the light, so light… I felt that I was weightless, as if my body lost its weight, that I …could fly…

There! There!

Afterwards I became happy, vital, laughing… my face hadn't moved, nor my lips, but I was laughing… and so good, so good, so heartedly, so pleasurably!

There! There! There! – Out of happiness!

Afterwards something was roaring inside of me, as if a beginning of a nign *was roaring –*

The head of the yeshiva jumped down from his bench and suddenly he was by his student: –

Nu – nu –

Afterwards I heard how it began to sing inside of me!

What did you feel? What? What? Say!

I felt that all of my senses were clogged and shut in me, and something inside was singing… and the way it should be – with no words at all, like this…

How? How?

No, I can't… earlier I knew… afterwards from the singing became… became…

What became – what?...

A kind of game… like, to make a distinction, I would have inside of me a fiddle, or like Yoyne Klezmer was sitting in me and played Sabbath songs, as by the Rebbe's table! Only that it was playing even better, even nobler, with even more spirit! And everything without a voice, without any voice – the most spiritual!...

You are blessed! You are blessed! You are blessed!

Now everything is gone! – The student says sadly, – my senses reopened in me, and I am so tired, so tired, so – tir–ed…! That I…

Rebbe – he suddenly gave a scream, grasping on to his heart, – Rebbe! Say the confession with me! They came after me! – The ministering angels had no melody! An angel with white wings!... Rebbe! Rebbe! Shma Yisroel; Shmaa… Yis…"[661]

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[661] Ale verk, vol 8, 23-5. The Hebrew version in this case has its variations but it does not present notions that are very different than the Yiddish version.

Peretz here touches on the experience of death, in an atypical way for a secular-modern person. The young idealist protagonist goes through his fatal mystical journey, without a shred of doubt or disbelief in his mission to live an utterly moral life. Peretz is dealing here with the notion that the thought of death declines with modernity; as Walter Benjamin argues, death becomes a metaphor for alienation and for the death of the spirit under capitalism.[662] Peretz is presenting a romantic textual alternative to this feeling of decline. The Yeshiva, the spirit of the Jewish pre-capitalist era, is diminishing. Idealism, the willingness to face death in order to reach a higher cause and the whole discussion of the meaning of mortality – all diminish in the face of capitalist development. If Peretz tried to give the story a satirical framework, he only partially succeeded. The intensity of the student's kabalistic experience is strong enough in the first Hebrew version and perhaps even slightly stronger in the Yiddish version (due to its dramatic character now in a spoken language, and due to the larger space it receives in the Yiddish). This intensity represents the longing for a spiritual–philosophical quest outside the norm. The Yiddish and Hebrew writer Hersh Dovid Nomberg (1876-1927) described the strong impression the reader gets from this story as follows:

> *You play ball or tennis on an open meadow, and it laughs and is lively. Now you are in a deep old forest. Quiet! Listen! You are alone with your soul, and your soul will unravel to you. A soft sound passes above the mountain tops, and the everlasting secret, which both scares and delights, assaults you. This is the impression from "The Kabbalists".*[663]

What Nomberg is describing is the way the story evolves from being more lighthearted and satirical at first, to sweeping away the reader into the student's mystical journey. The reader does not mock the student at these moments, as he might do before and after this scene, but

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[662]Quoted in: Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 187.

[663]Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets*, 15.

instead, the reader joins him through an emotional experience. The possibility of a gate or a bridge to some sort of a different dimension or sensation or knowledge appeals to the modern man, who now lives with an intensified sense of loss over the previous world that vanished with modernity.

The element of "hostile parody" gets minimized and its arrows go only against the source of power that impacts the student, that is, only against the Rebbe. But even the Rebbe, although he was misguided in his direction of the student, did nevertheless succeed in producing a human being who was truly committed to a higher cause.

The idea of the charismatic figure appealed to Peretz, who himself aspired to be a modern charismatic leader. He would only do so by substituting the merits of starvation and silent *nigunim* with favoring action to better social-economic conditions for everybody, not by keeping silent.

The death motif appears also in the story *Mishnat khasidim* (The Teaching of Hasidim). This story was also published both in Hebrew (1894) and Yiddish (Mishnes khsidim, 1902). In Hebrew it was published in Peretz's Hebrew *Yontef bletl – Ha-chetz* (The Arrow), his sole attempt at publishing radical material in the holy tongue.[664] The Yiddish version was published in the Yiddish Zionist publication *Der yud*,[665] in a period which is considered to be his post-radical period. Peretz wrote this story under the pen-name "The Orphan of

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[664]"*Mishnat Hasidim*" (Hebrew). In *Ha-hetz: yalkut sifruti*. Ed. I. L. Peretz. Warsaw: Shvartsberg, 1894. In Yiddish: "*Mishnes khasidim*" *Der yud* 4, no. 19 (1902). Nomberg considered this story to be Peretz's best amongst his Hasidic collection "*Khsidish*". He wrote that it is "undoubtedly the prime story of the book." (Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets*, 17). For more on The Arrow see chapter three.

[665]*Der yud*, May 8, 1902, 11–14. *Der Yud* was a journal that became a great platform for Yiddish Literature during its short run at the turn of the century. For more see Ruth R. Wisse, "Not the *Pintele Yid*, but the Full-Fledged Jew," *Prooftexts* 15.1 (1995): 33–61.

Nemirov", an allusion to Nathan (Nosn) Sternhartz (1780-1884). Nosn was born in Nemirov, Ukraine, and was a close student of the founder of the Breslov Hasidic group, Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810). It was famously Nosn who wrote down the teachings of his Rebbe and made them public.[666] And indeed in "The Teaching of Hasidim", Peretz borrowed and expanded parts of Nachman of Breslov's biography, written by Nosn Sternhartz, who also functions as the narrator.

"The Teaching of Hasidim", a monologue in its structure, uses as its first-person narrator a simple follower of the Rebbe. But, as Pinsker points out, this narrator unwittingly reveals the ironies and the uncertainties, and thus complicates what seems to be at first glance a traditional hagiographic tale.[667] This Hasid tells the story of the Rebbe's own daughter's wedding to none other than to a "dry" Litvak. The young hasid (whose own affection towards the Rebbe's daughter is more potent in the early Hebrew version), worries that the Hasidic dynasty is in danger, as no direct Hasidic heir to the Rebbe would be produced from this match.

The language of the Hasid is passionate and enthusiastic when he talks about his Rebbe and his teachings, contrary to his negativity towards the Litvak groom. The language of symbols becomes intensified in the later Yiddish version, with such lines as "every person is also a musical instrument, and a person's life is a melody, a happy or a sad melody, and when the melody is over, the soul flies out of the body and the melody, meaning the soul, unites itself again with the great melody before God's throne… and unhappy is he, the Rebbe said, who

[666]Peretz also used the pen name "The orphan from Nemirov" to sign the short story "The Rebbe's Pipe" that will be discussed in this chapter.

[667]Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 299.

lives without his melody…"[668] Here the Hasid transmits the Rebbe's teachings, which celebrate individuality through the image of music. Music and dance materialize during the Rebbe's daughter wedding. The band was playing and the Rebbe stood at the center of the room, chanting and dancing with his feet, swaying the rest of the guests. But the Litvak does not dance, a fact that angers the narrator very much.

In Nachman of Breslov's biography, there is a segment about the wedding of Nachman's daughter, and about the celebration during the Sabbath before the wedding. In it, Nosn recounts how Nachman danced, danced as he never did before, throughout almost the entire day. "And the amount of happiness there one cannot tell, happy is he who saw it."[669] Peretz clearly had read these passages and was influenced by them, given the setting of the plot and the language of the story.[670]

Towards the end of Peretz's story, the Hasid is amazed to discover that people gathered around the Litvak to hear his *dvar-toyre* (words about the Torah) the same way they gathered around the Rebbe's dancing and chanting. The Hasid learns from the Rebbe that the Litvak is a student of the greatest leader of the *mitnagdim*, the Vilna Gaon. The Hasid becomes shocked and silent, and then he hears the Rebbe tell him, "Go and order to give wine to the peasants and provender to the horses", and the Hasid remarks to the reader, "And to this day I don't know the secret of what he said."[671] The irony at the ending, lies in the narrator's awe

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[668]Peretz, Ale verk 4, 180.

[669]"*Hayey moharan*", Kuf-yud-zayin (Hebrew) http://breslev.eip.co.il/?key=3901 , retrieved August 23rd, 2013.

[670]See also Frieden, *Tradition and Innovation*, 57, N22, N23.

[671]"*Mishnat hasidim*", *Ha-khetz*, 1894. In the Yiddish version, the Rebbe asks him to bring whisky to the non-Jewish wagon-carts drivers.

from the very mundane words of the Rebbe, as if they hold some great mystery. This is Peretz's way of indicating to his readers that there is more to this story than just praise of the Rebbe, a point we'll return to towards the final analysis of this story.

In "The Teaching of Hasidim", writes Nicham Ross, Peretz shows clear symbolist tendencies in his writing; tendencies that would intensify in his later Hasidic stories. The mystical "feet dance" which is a non-verbal, experiential and symbolic gesture, is clearly preferred by the Hasidic Tzadik over the Litvak's intellectual Torah words. According to this story, the main Hasidic innovation is shifting the focus to emotions or insights that are impossible to accurately define verbally.[672]

Classic Marxist literary criticism has traditionally disfavored symbolist writing, instead overwhelmingly preferring realist writing. According to the Marxist theoretician Plekhanov, use of symbolism means that the writer is "Unable to grasp the meaning of that particular reality, or when he cannot accept the conclusion to which the development of that reality leads. He resorts to symbols when he cannot solve difficult, sometimes insoluble problems…"[673]

Such a biased negative attitude towards modernist forms is certainly outdated and was successfully contested by less vulgar interpreters of Marx and Marxism. Walter Benjamin wrote extensively about the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire, noting "that when we read Baudelaire, we are given a course of historical lessons by bourgeois society. These

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[672]Ross, *Masoret ahuva ve–snu'a*, 500.

[673]Pleakhanov continues:"And so in art, when an artist leans toward symbolism it is an infallible sign that his thinking – or the thinking of the class which he represents, in the sense of its social development – does not dare penetrate the reality which lies before his eyes."Plekhanov is quoted in: Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 337).

lessons can never be ignored… it is an illusion of vulgar Marxism that one can determine the social function of a material or intellectual product without reference to the circumstances and the bearers of its tradition."[674] This debate opens up the discussion of Peretz's literary paths, which included both realist and symbolist (and other modernist forms) tendencies, the "circumstances" of their production, and the kind of "historical lessons" they provide us. What was the basis for Peretz's choices? And how related it is to his ideological wanderings?

The one who dealt most with this issue in relation to Peretz, was Nomberg. Nomberg was part of Peretz's young writers circle in Warsaw, close to the Yiddish writers Avrom Reyzn (1876-1953) and Sholem Asch (1880-1957), one of several Hebrew writers who Peretz encouraged to switch to writing in Yiddish. Nomberg writes about the different influences that Peretz absorbed during his writing years, and defines him as someone who was constantly searching for ideas. As real as his affiliation with rising Jewish labor movements was, so too was Peretz's affection towards less socially oriented philosophies, among them Nietzschean philosophy, to which Nomberg dedicates long paragraphs in his article about Peretz. According to Nomberg:

> *Nietzsche was the protest against the materialism of the previous generation, against vulgar democracy, against the demand that the individual submit to the society and the environment. Here individualism had its greatest prophet… Of course, this current didn't pass over Peretz. He fell down under its influence, as everybody then did.*[675]

Regarding "The Teaching of Hasidim", the scholar David Roskies comments on how the faith of the simple Hasid in his Rebbe "becomes for Peretz a Nietzschean search for a leader who

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[674]Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* Ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 130.

[675]Nomberg, "A literarisher dor," in *Y.L. Perets*, 61-62.

can bear the world's suffering."[676] According to this view, the same movement that Peretz and other modern Jewish writers viewed as democratizing Jewish knowledge and life is also a movement that demands a charismatic leader and emphasizes individual redemption. Peretz, as said, published the Hebrew version of this story at the height of his radical years. Could it be that Peretz was expressing doubts over socially oriented politics even as early as the mid 1890's?

The story "The Teaching of Hasidim" does seem anomalous for the work Peretz was publishing at the time. It is hard to detect a radical political sentiment in it, other than the fact that social tension does exist in this story. However, as he does several years later in his famous Hasidic story "Between Two Mountains", Peretz choses here to present the class conflict in scholarly rather than in economic terms.[677] Contrasting the simple, unlearned Jew's attraction to the "soulful" Jewish practice he finds in Hasidism, as opposed to the intellectual elitism and a rigid commitment to Jewish law as represented by the Litvak. The Litvak might also represent the commitment of the European-liberal to the laws of the land, meaning the set of state-laws which fortify the system of private property.

As previously shown in chapter three, one of the major thinkers who Peretz challenged at the time and also in the pages of The Arrow, where this story was published, was the rationalist Zionist thinker Ahad-Haam. Ahad-Haam became interested in Nietzsche, and wrote extensively about him, following his discussions and polemics with the Hebrew writer M.Y.

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[676]Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, 118.

[677]Nicham Ross, "I.L. Peretz's ""Between Two Mountains": Neo Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity," in: *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and* Boundaries. Edited by Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer, and L. Scott Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 114-115. More on the story "Between Two Mountains" in this chapter.

Berditshevsky (1865-1921), who first introduced Nietzschean philosophical concepts to Jewish intelligentsia circles at the time. The polemics between these two influential figures in Hebrew-Zionist culture during the 1890's impacted Peretz a great deal, who influenced and in turn was influenced by Berditshevsky's interests in Nietzsche and in Hasidism.[678] Together with Nietzsche and Berditshevsky, Ahad-Haam might be considered a silent participant in this text. The story challenges the rationalist method of thinking and in this way paving the path for a revolutionary mode of thought, by emphasizing according to Ross the superiority of Hasidism over the *mitnagdim*.[679] It presents the rationalist view as elitist and overly intellectual, one that the narrator has trouble following, and as lacking the same charisma and mobilizing potential that the teachings of Hasidism posses. Contrary to Ahad-Haam, it is also non-Zionist in its Eastern-European focused nature.

The first thinker to make the connection between Hasidism and Nietzchienizm was in fact Ahad-Haam, in his article which became known as "*Shinuy ha-arakhin*" (Change of Values, 1898). Out of this polemical article against those he views as abandoning their Jewishness in favor of Nietzsche, in this case meaning Berditshevsky, comes out what he terms as "Jewish Nietzchienizm" ("*nietzscheanismus" yehudi*"). In later years, Ahad Ha-am's term became a common phrase for those who meshed their interest in Nietzsche and Judaism.[680]

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[678]The polemics between Ahad-Ha'am and Berditshevsky were dealt extensively in the scholarship. Nomberg wrote about Berditshevsky's influence on Peretz and his circle in Warsaw (see Nomberg, "a literarisher dor," in *Y.L. Perets*, 68-9). As early as 1893 Berditshevsky referred to Nietzsche as "my Rebbe" in a postcard to Ahad-Ha'am (Yaakov Golomb, "Al hapolmus ha-'Nietzscheyani' ben Ahad-Ha'am le-Micha Yosef Berditshevsky," (Hebrew) *Misaviv lanekuda* 2007, 69 N3. Golomb's article is based on chapters 3-4 in his book *Nietzsche and Zion*, Ithaca, New York 2004.

[679]Ross, *Masoret ahuva ve–snu'a*, 117.

[680]See Friedrich Niewöhner**,** "Jüdischer Nietzscheanismus seit 1888 – Ursprünge und Begriff," In *Jüdischer Nietzscheanismus*, edited by Werner Stegmaier and Daniel Krochmalnik (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 22.

Ahad-Haam writes that "Judaism never only emphasized mercy, and never made its own ***Übermensch*** as subsidiary for the great masses, as if his whole being is to work in favor of the masses. Everybody knows what is the value of "the Tzadik" in our moral literature, from the Talmud and the *midrashim* up until the literature of the "*hasidut*". The Tzadik was not created for the sake of others, but the opposite: "the whole world was created only for this purpose", and he is an end to itself."[681]

We see that in "The Teaching of Hasidim", and even more so in "Between Two Mountains", Peretz gives voice to debates that were going on at the time, in which Ahad Ha-am was one of the first to voice.[682] Peretz adds a grounding in a class analysis to these debates: both between the elitist Litvak and the simple Hasid, as Ross points out, but also between the Rebbe and the Hasid himself.

The theory of the superiority of Hasidism over the *mitnagdim*, held by Ross and others, seem to miss the fact that the story "The Teaching of Hasidim" presents an image of Jewish national unity through the sayings and the death of the Rebbe. While Hasidim are presented in the story as more attractive to the simple-unlearned Jew, their Rebbe belongs to both worlds. The Rebbe, capable of mesmerizing people through his physical gestures and dances, still shows appreciation for the intellectual accomplishment of his new son-in-law. Even when the Rebbe was performing his dance during the wedding, he did not negate his son-in-law's skilled intellectual verbal analysis:

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[681]Ahad Haam, *Kol kitve* (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1953), kuf.nun.daled–kuf.nun.hey.

[682]On the opposition to Ahad-Haam's rationalist-positivist viewpoint amongst the Hebrew writers who belonged turn of the 20th century "Hebrew ruplic of letters" (like Brenner, Gnessin, Shneur), see Miron, *Bodedim bemoadam*, 363-365.

> *The musicians were silent, the instruments stopped playing, the noise rose to the silence. "The entire world" was drawn to the finesse of the matter, after the spirituality of the* nign*, the melodic chant. Even though, as is the customs at weddings, people were weeping, we all stepped aside in a moment and went towards the middle, to the center where his holy feet stood, and we felt at that moment, how the spiritual* nign *spreads through all of our organs and penetrates our hearts and minds, and we are filled with honey sweetness. (...) but our groom stood from afar and was not attracted to the* nign*. (...) my eyes were shedding tears, and I wanted to get out of the dance circle, grab the groom, and tear him up like a fish. But the Rebbe held my neck and whispered in my ear:*
> *Do not be afraid, at mealtime he will say Torah out of my dance.*
> *And so it was. (*Ha-chetz*, 1894)*

The Rebbe himself calls for unity as the whole story revolves around a wedding of the Rebbe's daughter to a pupil of the leader of the mitnagdim, and for promoting understanding between the different Jewish factions. In this sense, the premise is reminiscent of Zweifel's view in "Peace upon Israel" in which he expresses an apologetics towards Hasidism, and a desire to promote peace between the different factions of the Jewish people.[683] Furthermore, it is understood during the story that the Rebbe (the spirit) eventually died as a result of the death of his son–in–law (the body). The two opposites that make together the imagined whole are thus as one.

In light of unity seeking, it seems that Peretz is continuing the task he began in "In the Mail Coach", serving as a bourgeois-nationalist of the Jewish-Diaspora. His efforts are similar for example to the work of the important theoretician of Jewish Diaspora nationalism and historian, Simon Dubnow, who wrote a series of articles on the Hasidic movement in the Russian-Jewish journal *Voskhod* (1888-1893).[684] The more expansive 1902 Yiddish version, "*Mishnas khsidim*", certainly strengthens the line of national unity, coming out when a series

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[683]See N644.

[684]Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 115.

of Peretz's Hasidic stories appeared (including "If Not Even Higher", "Between Two Mountains", "The Metamorphosis of a Melody" and others). But all this said, the figure of the narrator still must be taken in its full subversive account. The narrator, the simple Hasid, is genuinely angry towards the Litvak and his elitism. He would have liked to "tear him up like a fish", but the Rebbe holds him back. Later, the Hasid, after being disappointed that the Rebbe did not confronting the groom for repeating what the Rebbe "said with his feet" – said he felt "as if a daggering sword was stuck in his belly".

We see here how the Rebbe himself, the elite of the Hasidim, is softening up the lower-class Hasid's instinctive anger out of a desire to appease the learned Litvaks. Thus the Rebbe functions as the ultimate obstacle to changing the existing social order. The ironic ending of the story emphasizes the lack of awareness and of the blind belief of the Hasid to his Rebbe – the Hasid's false consciousness.

Peretz's main artistic achievement with this story is the introduction of symbolist tendencies into Hebrew literature. In addition, this story is a precursor to many of Peretz's future Hasidic creations, being one of his first non-satirical stories that was couched in the Hasidic world.

In his neo-Hasidic literature, which is less politically charged than his urban-realist literature, Peretz did not simply abandon radical thinking, as he was accused of doing by progressive literature-critics.[685] In fact, his use of Hasidic symbolism reflected his search once more for the spirit of revolution. Peretz attributed Hasidic literature to being the true pioneering work

[685]Examples of such criticism are numerous. See for example Moyshe Olgin's quoted in: Ross, "I.L. Peretz's "Between Two Mountains": Neo Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity," 115; Rosentsvayg, Radikaler peryod, 100.

of modern Yiddish literature,[686] trying in this way to ground his modern-secular project in semi-ancient Jewish symbolism. Karl Marx famously wrote of the reliance of French revolutionaries on Roman symbolism (or the English on the Old Testament):

> *Unheroic though bourgeois society is, it nevertheless needed heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war, and national wars to bring it into being. And in the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic the bourgeois gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions, that they needed to conceal from themselves the bourgeois-limited content of their struggles and to keep their passion on the high plane of great historic tragedy. Similarly, at another stage of development a century earlier, Cromwell and the English people had borrowed from the Old Testament the speech, emotions, and illusions for their bourgeois revolution. When the real goal had been achieved and the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke supplanted Habakkuk.*
> *Thus the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again.*[687]

"Finding once more the spirit of revolution" was indeed the task Peretz took upon himself while creating his Hasidic stories. However, the story of Peretz and of Diaspora-Jewish nationalism in general, particularly in its Bundist form, was not one of "limited bourgeois struggle", for it never strived to found a modern liberal state. And in the case of the Bund, it represented the interests of working-class people. The development of an ethno-class consciousness in Eastern European amongst Jews at the turn of the 19th century[688] required some ancient ethnic symbolism for its cultural platform. The Hasidic world, which came out of Eastern-European Jewish life, provided a rich bank of symbols for the proponents of

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[686]Peretz in his address to the 1908 Yiddish language conference in Czernowitz. See: Peretz, *Briv un redes* – 1944, 371.

[687]Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, translated by Saul K. Padover from the German edition of 1869 (Marx/Engels Internet Archive 1995, 1999), 5-6.

[688]See: Peled, *Class and Ethnicity*, 16-30.

Diaspora Jewish nationalism in Eastern Europe, including the Jewish socialists. As the Jewish labor movement moved from revolutionary internationalism to revolutionary Jewish socialism during the 1890's,[689] it drew some inspiration from the Hasidic world in order to glorify its own struggle, rather than to parody that world, as is clear for example from examining the works of S. An-ski. An-ski is best remembered as the author of the Dybbuk, but he also wrote the lyrics for what became the Bund's anthem *Di shvue* (The Oath).[690]

Before this major question can be confronted through Peretz's major Hasidic texts, I will turn now to examine further the intertwinement of religion and radical thought in relation to Peretz's work, using Terry Eagelton's work as a backdrop. For I believe that although the influence of Nietzcheanic thought over Peretz in these stories is clear and indeed needs to be properly deciphered, still the social interpretation of Peretz's Hasidic stories has been neglected in recent years and deserves a reassessment.

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[689]Ibid, 31-70.

[690]Besides the *Shvue*, An–ski (1863–1920) wrote at least one other Yiddish poem dedicated to the Bund (both from the beginning of the 20th century), and contributed once to the *Yontef bletlekh*. By the same token, An–ski became known for writing the famous Yiddish play the symbolist drama "The Dybbuk", set in the Hasidic world of Eastern Europe. An–ski himself read Peretz's collected works in 1901 and was impressed by how modern his Yiddish literature was. An–ski also wrote a Yiddish poem called *Ashmedai*, which was inspired by Peretz's *Monish*, which successfully combined neo-Hasidism with radicalism (see Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-Sky* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011). An–ski also testified in his memoirs how far the real Peretz was removed from the Hasidic world, thus emphasizing its use as a symbol, not as a modern ideology. An–ski wrote that Peretz, "the highest poet of the Hasidic legend did not like, almost hated, Hasidic Rebbes, seeing most of them as con men."(S. An–sky, *Gezamelte shriftn: tsenter band* (Yiddish) (Warsaw: An–sky farlag, 1922), 161). Peretz also shows negative feelings towards Hasidim in response to their protests against his story "Shamya gibor" which prevented him from being published in the paper (see N706). In a letter to Dinezon, he states that the Hebrew readers are worse than the Yiddish ones, and that the worst among them are the Hasidim, whom he portrays as an old hag who can't take a joke ("*kebogeret zkana asher lo… takhpots bemahatalot*", in Peretz, *Briv un redes* 1929, 71-72).

Faith and Revolution, Secularism and Imperialism: Between Peretz and Eagleton

In his book "Reason, Faith and Revolution" (2009), Terry Eagleton explores the benefits that radicals can receive by exploring Jewish and Christian scriptures. "Radicals", he writes, "might discover there some valuable insights into human emancipation, in an era where the political left stands in dire need of good ideas."[691] Speaking for our own time, Eagleton's words are equally applicable to Peretz's time. The rise of a Jewish labor movement at the end of the 19th century in Eastern Europe required some agency to mediate radical social ideas to semi-traditional readers. This tendency to write stories couched in a Hasidic *milieu* intensified towards the turn of the century. One particular reason might be Peretz's internalization of the fact that he was no longer writing exclusively for a readership of "Jewish intelligentsia". In the late 1890s he began lecturing to Jewish workers, a wider audience than in the gatherings at his literary salon, which consisted of narrow circle of intellectuals.[692]

The politicization of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, which the Bund and other movements were aiming for, required a kind of modern literature that would be both critical of the bourgeois mind set and yet include some specific Jewish symbolism. The Hasidic movement, a modern movement in itself, was a perfect cultural tool to serve this purpose. In a way, Jewish Marxists, while incorporating some form of national agenda (i.e., forming the Bund) into their radical platform, needed to reflect this national agenda on the cultural front

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[691]Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*: *Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xi–xxi.

[692]Ella Bauer," From the Salons to the Street: The Development of the Jewish Salon in Warsaw at the End of the 19th Century," 155.

as well. Peretz, while himself neither a Marxist, nor a Hasid, produced cultural material that would meet these needs.[693] Hasidism can be *reinvented* for this purpose as a socially democratizing movement – the sort of Judaic tradition to which Marx owes a great deal[694] (historical accuracy aside); a movement that promotes a communal life based on morality; and that – and this is a very important point – is built on the linguistic symbolic capital of Yiddish rather than Hebrew.[695]

Eagleton shows in his the book the similarities between socialist revolutionary thinking and the scriptures of various religions as they relate to the establishment of a utopian society based on moral vision. He analyzes the way modern Western atheism can serve to distinguish "us" from "them". Fanatical Muslims, Eagleton tells us, are the contemporary version of "the poor that shall inherit the earth". For liberal-atheists who support "wars against terror", such a concept is distasteful. For both socialist and religious belief systems "no middle ground" is permitted: "the choice between justice and the powers of this world is stark and absolute, a

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[693]And not as Pinsker argues that "Peretz developed his neo–Hasidic stories mainly for literary and stylistic reasons"; though Pinsker does admit that some socialist ideology exists in these stories (Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 298).

[694]Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 18.

[695]In fact, the relation of Hasidism to Yiddish was more complex than was portrayed by *Yidishists* who tended to be neo–romantics who glorified the usage if Yiddish by the Hasidic movement. Traces of such a romantic-yidishist approach can be found in relatively recent works as well, see: Yitshak Korn, *Jews at the Crossroads* (England: Cornwall Books, 1983). Korn writes: "Hasidism appeared on the scene and took up the already prepared instrument of Yiddish, thus precipitating a fruitful union of the two… Hasidism became the standard bearer of the ordinary folk, making brilliant use of their Yiddish tongue to explain to them the great new concept."(161–3). A more current and critical approach to the Hasidic movement identifies within it several currents: an elitist strand for which Hasidic Hebrew homiletic literature was written for; wonder tales in both Yiddish and Hebrew for both elites and literate non elites; and oral folk culture for the semiliterate and illiterate masses. Dynner writes that "praise of the disenfranchised at the expense of elites is notably lacking in Hasidic homiletic literature, and this should come as no surprise: such biting social criticism would not have earned a very enthusiastic response in… [this] elite Hebrew readership.", see: Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 198.

matter of fundamental conflict and antithesis. What is at issue is a slashing sword, not peace, consensus, and negotiation. Jesus does not seem to be any sort of liberal…"[696]

In Peretz's mid-decade *Bletlekh* articles, he relates sarcastically to Jewish religious traditions and gives a social-economic class-oriented interpretation of Jewish religion. The belief that "charity would save from death" for example Peretz wrote, is not a lucrative business since "one does not get any money from it! When you give, you have less, and the poor man has barely enough for his immediate needs…"[697] This sarcasm is reflective of a few changes Peretz has gone through from his positivist pro-market approach of the late 1880's early 1890's. In this article from 1895 "What do I want?", he sees religion as an instrument of control of the public opinion in the hands of the rich and powerful, duplicating (rather than subverting) the current un-equal power relations. This is what Peretz had to say on the custom of praying in the same article:

> *From praying one doesn't get any money … and the proof – our plutocrats, who strain their lives and very often with compassion, with integrity and with humanism together, all to become richer, do not themselves pray at all, and are only pleased, when poor people don't put their prayer books out of their hands*
> *If the prayer book was to have the power as a three-ruble bill… – the Yontef-bletlekh would have been distributed to the poor and all of the loan sharks and bankers would have held prayer books and prayed…*
> *Praying is a solution for good manners, for quietness; praying sometimes pacifies the hunger of a beggar, as the finger of a poor mother at the mouth of her haggard child. Praying is a solution for many things, but one doesn't get any money out of it...*
> *I am reviewing all of the 613 commandments, and I don't see one of them out of which could have gotten a three-ruble bill—directly or indirectly!*[698]

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[696]Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 24.

[697]Ale verk, vol 8, 72-73. The article is entitled:"What should I want?" (*"Vos zol ikh veln?"*, *Hoshayne*, col. 22).

[698]Ibid, 72-3.

The society which is based on capital accumulation is ridiculed in this passage. It resonates with Marx's view on religion both as an "opium" and as a "soul in a soulless world". It offers the *Bletlekh* as the opposite of the daily prayer book – the *sider*. The interest of the higher classes today, maintains that the latter (the *sider*), which literally means "arrangement" or "order", would arrange the lives of the poor. However this "arrangement" would change in a heartbeat if the rich could find a way to make their own practice of religion to be profitable.

Peretz's conclusion in 1897 (and in the years ahead) regarding the usage of religious codes, language and characters in his modern literature, took things a step further. He understands that this religious "arrangement" – that is being top-down fed to the poor – could be reversed and become a mobilizing tool of the poor in their struggle to inherit the earth.[699]

With Yokhanan The Melamed and other Hassidic figures, Peretz reached a much higher level of artistic and political sophistication, aiming to break beyond the narrow circles of the intelligentsia, his customary readership. Radical ideas could not be communicated to masses of traditional Jews simply through a simplistic attack on the "religious", as members of the Jewish Enlightenment typically proposed "Religion needs to be patiently deciphered", Eagleton paraphrases Marx, "not arrogantly repudiated."[700]

Even more so, the "religious", as much as it is a valid category in the first place,[701] contains some socializing traits that the so called modern can learn from. The power of "faith" is

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[699]For example we see religious symbolism in the black movement in the U.S., and in the Catholic Worker Movement.

[700]Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 90.

[701]Gil Anidjar, "*Secularism*," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006). Anidjar gives a post-colonial take on the binary categories of secular-religious. He claims that both concepts are the invention of Christian imperialists as a means as distinguishing themselves from their colonial subjects, thus claiming cultural superiority and creating another divisive element in colonized societies themselves, namely the secular elite that would become

needed in order to keep on believing that "against all appearances to the contrary, the powerless can come to power."[702] So these texts by Peretz which are set in the Hasidic world cannot be ideologically dismissed by progressives, as they were by critics in the Soviet Union and others who saw them as a mere reflection of Peretz's return to a petit–bourgeois nationalist agenda.[703] Instead, they should be viewed as his attempt to communicate radical ideas to a semi-traditional readership. For Peretz, progressives must succeed at winning the traditional readers' hearts in order for the struggle for true emancipation to succeed. This attempt allowed him to explore new aesthetic forms and discursive means, and put him in a natural position to criticize the liberal-positivist principals. The following quote by Eagleton accurately describes Peretz's view of religion:

> *Karl Marx described religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature," as well as the soul of the soulless conditions… it [religion[does not understand that we could live spiritually in any authentic sense of the word only if we were to change materially. Like Romanticism, it is a reaction to a heartless world which stays confined to the sphere of feelings and values. It therefore represents a protest against a spiritual bankruptcy with which it remains thoroughly complicit. Yet such religion is a symptom of discontent even so, however warped and repugnant. Phrases like "the sigh of the oppressed creature," the heart of a heartless world", and "the soul of the soulless conditions" are not for Marx purely pejorative. Religious illusions stand in for more practical forms of protest. They signpost a problem to which they themselves are not the solution.*[704]

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the bureaucracy of the colonial power. Anidjar's error lays mostly in the over-emphasis of cultural reasoning as the driving force of history (hence the expression "Christian Imperialism"). Christianity is clearly being essentialized here, at the expense of a universal category such as modes of production.

[702]Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution,* 27.

[703]Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener,* 242-6.

[704]Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution,* 42.

Peretz altered his viewpoint towards religion. He went from seeing it as a problem in itself to merely the signpost indicating a deeper social problem. But his split attitude towards it can be traced back as we've seen in this chapter even to his early prose set in the Hasidic world.

I will examine the last argument through the remainder of the chapter by looking further at Peretz's Hasidic stories from the height of his radical years, and by elaborating the discussion concerning the intersection between radical thought and religion.

To Make Sense of the Ridiculous – Serious Against Whom?

The Yiddish story *Dem rebns tsibek* (The Rebbe's Pipe,) was first published in the second year of Peretz's radical publication *Di yontef bletlekh* (*Der omer*, 1895). This story tells the tale of how a poor and childless Jewish couple finds financial prosperity and gains children through entrepreneurship with a "holy artifact" that belonged to the Rebbe. The couple's new source of income comes from selling the right to touch the Rebbe's pipe, which the couple received from the Rebbe himself. This magic phallic object solves their infertility problem as well. More often than not, this story was viewed by critics as a mere satire of Hasidism.

For example in 1901, Nakhum Sokolow criticized this story's inclusion in Peretz's first collected works. Sokolow wrote: "in my opinion there wasn't any need to include the story *The Rebbe's Pipe* in the *Collected Works*, [the story] is a weak satire of Hasidism in the spirit of the writers of "*Hashakhar*"…"[705] Ken Frieden, a contemporary interpreter of Peretz's

[705]Sefer ha-Shanah. Sokolow, N. (Ed.). Warsaw, 1900-1906. V.2. Literary, 240. "*Hashakhar*" was a Hebrew monthly (1868-1885) in the spirit of the Jewish Enlightenment but also with a Jewish nationalist bent, written under the editorial leadership of Peretz Smolanskin. It featured anti-clerical material in its articles. See more in third chapter.

Hasidic stories, holds a similar view that "The Rebbe's Pipe" is a satire of Hasidim.[706] Frieden does characterize many other such stories by Peretz as "so called Hasidic", which generate a "serious parody."[707] This term "serious parody" was coined by Linda Hutcheon,[708] and it means "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text… [it is] repetition with critical distance."[709] But one must differentiate, when it comes to modern forms of parody and in order to identify a suitable framework for discussing Peretz's work, between the use of the parodied text as a *target*, versus the use of the parodied text as a *weapon*.[710] I argue here that this definition of modernist parody that uses the parodied text as weapon is applicable in the case of "The Rebbe's Pipe". The Hasidic background and motifs are used by Peretz not in order to satirize Hasidim, but rather as a weapon against a much broader range of targets, namely the modern economy and some of its features, such as: the entrepreneurship, the concept of fetish, and the social ladder itself.

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[706] The other short story Frieden includes in the satirical category is *Dos shtrayml* (The Fur Hat, 1894). It is hard to counter his view regarding that story, which fits the label as a satire against Hasidim (or against pious people in general) (Ziv Frieden, "*Parodya ve–hegyogrfya: sipurim khasidiim–kivyakhol shel Perets*," (Hebrew) *Khulyot* 7 (2002), 45). An earlier example that includes some satirical elements against Hasidim is the rather weak Hebrew short story "Shmaya gibor" (*Ha-tzfira*, no. 183, August 1892; 1902 in Yiddish). It has some elements from "Kabbalists" (a Hasid dies during a night of hallucinations; also a variation in "A Night of Horror"), and it presents an early version of the Hasid vs. traditional Rabbi confrontation ("Teaching of Hasidim", "Between Two Mountains") – but both these elements are poorly executed in relation to those other stories. However, this soft satire, created a commotion in the editorial office of *Ha-tzfira*, which received protest letters from Hasidic people for the way they were portrayed (a group of Chabad Hasidim is presented in the story as violent zealots). The old editor of the paper, Slonimski, did not allow Peretz to publish any additional material in the paper as a result, and blamed his associate editor Sokolow for publishing the story (Peretz tells this story in a letter to Dinezon and referred to Slonimski as "that old, stupid dog.", see Peretz, *Briv un redes* 1929, 71-72). Peretz was dependant on *Ha-tzfira* (in return for his contributions they published advertisements for his publications, which were vital for generating his sales). His status in the paper improved greatly after his friend Sokolow became its sole editor in 1894.

[707]Frieden, "*Parodya ve-hegyogrfya*," 45-46.

[708]Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

[709]Ibid, 6.

[710]Ibid, 52.

Unlike "If Not Even Higher" or other Hasidic stories by Peretz, in which the story is told through the eyes of the *Litvak* "other",[711] or outsider, Hasidic people are at the center of "The Rebbe's Pipe".

When the story opens, the main protagonists, the couple Sore-Rivke and Khaim-Borekh, lack both children and bread. The husband is a typical pious Jew who sits and learns traditional books and does not earn an income. Khaim-Borekh, Peretz tells us with great irony, used to sit for long hours with the Rebbe "and they didn't utter even one word between themselves, but rather communicated through eye contact, with a wink! Well, would you speak with such a figure about business?"[712]

His wife, Sore-Rivke works in order to provide for the family. She deals in beans and yeast, eking out just enough to earn her husband the title "Khaim-Borekh Sore-Rivke's", or in short "Sore-Rivke's husband". Their depiction is consistent with the common portrayal of traditional Eastern European Jews living in severe poverty. Their wedding money is gone; their small house had to be sold; they nourish themselves on potatoes with water for breakfast and soup with an old bagel for supper; the mythical number seven signifies the number of years it took until the wife could afford to make her husband a new coat (*a kapote*). This banal description of Jewish poverty bears some similarity to the description in Peretz's realist short story "The Anger of a Jewish Woman ". But in this story, the husband decides to take action: he will have a word with the Hasidic Rebbe about the matter.

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[711]See discussion later in this chapter over the story "If Not Even Higher".

[712]Peretz, Ale Verk, vol 4, 36.

And what “wise advice” does the Rebbe have for Khaim-Borekh? The Rebbe advises him that he should rid himself of the small tobacco pipe he's been using (*dos pipkele*, only fit for a common coachman according to the Rebbe), and take the Rebbe's own festive tobacco pipe with a shaft instead. Thus far, the story is similar to many other Maskilic satires against the backwardness of Hasidim and their adherence to the silly authoritative voice of the Rebbe. But further developments in the plot alter the targets of the critique, and the Hasidic backdrop becomes a weapon in a greater battle, as can be seen in this passage from the ending of the story, when Khaim-Borekh returns to his shtetl with the Rebbe's pipe:

> *Even before Khaim-Borekh was off of the cart, a hundred people had already asked him to lend them his pipe, for a month, a week, a day, an hour, a minute, a second…*
> *People wanted to cover him with gold!*
> *And to all of them he answered:*
> *"What do I know? Ask Sore-Rivke…"*
> *A prophecy came out of his mouth*
> *–*
> *Sore-Rivke has a nice business…*
> *Eighteen big coins for a blow from the pipe! Eighteen big coins, not a cent less!*
> *And the pipe helps!*
> *And people paid. Now Sore-Rivke had her own little house, a nice shop, lots of yeast in the shop, and many other kinds of merchandise besides.*
> *She herself became rounder, healthier, filled out! She made her husband new underwear, put away his glasses…*
> *For a few weeks the nobleman's people came asking about the pipe! Three silver rubles were put down, you bet!*
> *And kids? You want to know.*
> *Sure! Three or four already… he completely settled down as well…*
> *–*
> *In the study house there is constant chatter.*
> *Some say that Sore-Rivke is not willing to return the pipe and that she refuses to give it back to the Rebbe!*
> *Others say that she already returned it to him a while back! And that the one she has now is a different one…*
> *He himself, Khaim-Borekh, is silent.*
> *And what's the difference? As long as it helps! (Ale verk, vol 4, 41-42)*

That is the end of the story. The passion to consume the pipe, its surrounding fetish, the redeemed manhood of Khaim-Borekh and the thriving entrepreneurship of his wife – all get mixed up in this libidinal–financial extravaganza. Could this really be summed up as a simple satire against Hasidim?

In fact, Peretz's creation can easily be equated to celebrity fetishism in our time: consider human logos, rock & roll museums, or that famous singer's "unique" fragrance? The business of profiting from peoples' irrationality has only increased with the progress of the famously termed "cultural industry". This development comes hand in hand with a liberating effect as well – the protagonist's sexual potency and his ability to reproduce are dependent on this "nice business", which is based on deceit. This deceit becomes the source of life and livelihood for the couple. They have mastered the rules of the modern economy, exactly what Peretz is targeting in this "modernist parody".[713]

Materialist Faith in The Stories of Yokhanan the Melamed

Peretz uses pious figures differently in his story "He Who Gives Life, Provides Shelter ". This story appeared in 1897, the same year in which the radical "Weavers Love" appeared.[714] The fact that they were published so close in time confused Peretz's interpreters who pointed to them as contrasts, an example of Peretz's duality and ambivalence towards radical

[713]Another interpretation to be taken into account is that the wife's entrepreneurship was not selling the right to use the pipe, but rather the right to enjoy her sexual favors. This version would explain her sudden fertility, as well as her husband's associated silence. In French, the expression *faire une pipe* means to "perform fellatio". But this expression dates only to the first half of the 20th century.

[714]It appeared in Hebrew in *Ha-Zfira* Jan 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 1897. And in the journal *Ha-dor* 3-5 1900-1; and an extended Yiddish version, dated 1897 in Ale verk, vol 4.

politics.[715] But as we shall see, that is a false conclusion that stems from a misinterpretation of the story and of Peretz's usage of pious figures.

"He Who Gives Life, Provides Shelter" from the series "Yokhanan The Melamed's stories" did not achieve canonical status among Peretz's radical readers nor among his romantic followers. This story, which was published in 1897 in Hebrew and Yiddish, shows the social-political, theological, and cultural-literal problems and concerns that Peretz himself was addressing at the time. Published during the same year as the story "Weavers Love",[716] both stories relate to social struggles, class politics, and class relations.

"Weavers Love" was written in an epistolary form, and discussed the idea of social struggle and its merits, exploring the possibility of a working class revolt.

"He Who Gives Life" is narrated by a Hasid who is a traditional *melamed*, a teacher of children in a *heder*. He tells a story of the failed marriage of his late brother's daughter, Brokhe-Leah who married a modern man. In the eyes of the narrator, this groom is a nihilist and crude man, who spends his time playing cards and shouting at his wife. The narrator's criticism is warranted; his niece's husband physically abuses his pregnant wife, causing her to give birth to a crippled baby. He abandons his wife and baby, fleeing alone to America to find his fortune.

Here Peretz reveals the dark side of the American dream, exposing a viciousness that is inherent in the selfish pursuit of wealth at all costs. The husband had demanded that his wife

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[715]Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*.

[716]See second chapter.

have an abortion, "as the rich women do", with the ironic justification that he cannot afford to support the child.

In the telling, the traditional narrator-character of Yokhanan the Melamed is in no way glorified by Peretz. Although Yokhanan confronts the abusing husband, he does so only after learning that the young husband had cursed his late brother, not because of the violence he committed against the young wife. We understand indirectly that Yokhanan himself is not opposed to violence. He admits that he himself was violent towards his young pupils, believing in the merit of "educational violence", especially toward a student who is on a "bad path", meaning secularized. Moreover, he has inner thoughts of wanting Brokhe-Leah's son to die, for he fears that he is not capable of supporting the crippled child and the rest of his family.

The fact that both the traditional narrator and the secularized husband are violent people, is how Peretz illustrates the point he is trying to make by employing a traditional figure as his storyteller. In the rather long introduction by Yokhanan the Melamed, Peretz lays out the cultural conflict between religious Jews and Enlightened Jews. According to him, each side possesses a form of faith: Enlightened Jews believe in abstract scientific concepts, traditional Jews believe in a divine being:

> *Everybody has his Rebbe, his faith, almost – his little idol worshiping!*
> *Everybody looks in the mouths of strangers! Everybody kisses, it's just that one kisses the curtain that covers the Torah, although he doesn't know what's written inside; and a second one kisses his copy of "The Revealer of Secrets"[717], when it falls down off the table. And I saw with my own eyes how one of*

[717]It is interesting to note that both "Weavers Love" and this story relate to Josef's Perl's maskilic novel "The Revealer of Secrets" (1819). Pearl's book employed a Hasidic protagonist, as in Peretz's story but Perl's novel was written in the epistolary form, which Perl used in order to satirize the Hasidic world, similar to Montesquieu's use of this genre in French literature. "Weavers Love" used the epistolary genre as well but in a different way – not in a satirical sense but in the sense of portraying the struggle for the creation of the self-consciousness of the individual subject, similar to Dostoyevsky's novel "Poor Folk" (see also second chapter).

their people kissed a copy of the Hebrew translation of "Les Mystères de Paris"! and according to what I've heard from a trustworthy person, "Les Mystères de Paris" is a terrible story of a "Kharvona", – not our Kharvona, who is remembered as the good character from the Book of Esther[718] *– but a lumberjack from Paris, who walked around barefooted on pieces of glass; and more such lies that a Parisian liar came up with, and a maskil from Vilnius rewrote in Hebrew! {...} how are our people worse than the enlightened Jews, who do nothing more than tell and tell old wives tales and sing the praises of their great men? Since – we don't scare our readers with robbers, murderers, fake money and fake I.O.U.'s! Must one write what is entirely untrue? (Ale verk, vol 4, 46-7)*[719]

Peretz here, through his religious character, evens out the cultural playing field between the modern-realistic cultural productions, the sort of pulp fiction that in Yiddish literature is associated foremost with Shomer's name (See first chapter), and hagiographic literature. It stresses, perhaps unintentionally, the historical fact that modern Jewish literature did not seamlessly take the place of religious literature. In fact, the traditional, religious literature continues to exist and flourish today. Peretz himself tried to create a modern Jewish literature, in Yiddish and in Hebrew[720] that would build upon traditional Jewish sources like the Bible and Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's writings; and unlike other writers, such as Berditshevsky, Peretz had no real intention to "rescue" genuine Hasidic teachings or stories for his own modern era.[721]

As for the social political context, while Perl's novel is related to the rise of the modern state and of the bourgeoisie, Peretz's stories discuss broader social struggles and the role of the working class.

[718]Kharvona worked in king Ahasuerus' palace, and who helped him be aware of Haman's plot against him.

[719]This is a translation of the Yiddish version of the story. The Hebrew version in this segment is rather similar to the Yiddish, but not dissimilar to Perl's "The Revealer of Secrets", the Hebrew version is linguistically–subversive, in that it immolates the pious Hebrew tone of sacred Jewish texts but turns its meaning around satirically.

[720]The fact that this story appears in Hebrew illustrates Peretz's commitment to Hebrew well after the launch of his Yiddish cultural project. Though as Miron points out, writing in Hebrew did become a burden for him in the last decade of his life (1905-1915) (Miron, *from Continuity to Contiguity*, 298).

[721]Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*, 297–298.

Peretz also tells us how subjective and contingent the concept of "the real" is. In the realm of art, it is uncertain what is closer to reality, or what functions as a more useful cultural tool. Both the pious and the modernizing character in this story suffer from economic hardships and the secular husband has not better and more moral ways to deal with them. The secular husband chose to beat his pregnant wife and flee to America, and he believes it is a worthy ideal to pursue your narrow self interests, even if it means stepping on other people to realize your goal.

It is interesting that the value of *Bildung* – self improvement through education – is something that is highly valued by the pious character in the story. Yokhanan, a teacher himself,[722] glorifies the value of learning for learning sake – for him it serves as an escape from his troubles. He describes his feelings in these words:

> *I open the Talmud and I feel that the sky has opened for me! That the Master of the Universe with his great grace gave me wings; he gave me big, wide wings! And I fly with them; I'm an eagle! And I fly far, far away! Not across the ocean; I fly out of this world!*
> *Out of this world of deceit, of flattery, of evil torments!*
> *And I fly inside a completely different world! To a new world, to a world of plenty of good things, of only good things; to a world without the authority of bellied bosses, of aristocrats – ignorant; a world without the shape of a coin, without being worried about making a living. There isn't any woman who is having hard labor, aren't any hungry children, aren't any feminine voices!*
> *And there is me, me the poor, sick, beaten, famished and parched teacher, – me crushed by poverty, who is silent here as a fish, people are stepping on me like a worm, – there I am the man, the aristocrat, the person in charge! And I'm free and free is my will, and I can create! Worlds I create and worlds I demolish! And I build new ones in their place! New, better and prettier worlds! And I live in them, fly around in them, I'm in paradise… in true paradise! (Ale verk, vol 4, 57)*[723]

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[722]Yokhanan had been a teacher for seven years in Warsaw at the time of the story (Ale verk, vol 4, 46), just as Peretz himself who moved to Warsaw in 1890 and published the story in 1897.

[723]This is a translation from the Yiddish. There are some variations in comparison with the Hebrew version. For example, Yokhanan describes the strength he feels in the study room as opposed to his weakness in the outside world in a more violent tone in Hebrew: "I am there a man amongst men, a violent man, a ruler and a governor, and my hand is in everything and everything is in my hand; and I build 310 worlds and destroy them…" (*Ha-Zfira* Jan 17, 1897, p. 2).

Peretz portrays here the reactionary mindset – the one who criticizes bourgeois values for their materialism and instead offers a romantic return to some ancient wisdom. As Eagleton points out, "in the absence of genuinely revolutionary art, only a radical conservatism, hostile like Marxism to the withered values of liberal bourgeois society, could produce the most significant literature."[724] That and the conceptualization of the Enlightenment as a belief system, allows both the reactionary and the progressive to join forces, at least on the cultural front, in defeating the bourgeois control. Peretz's literature, in speaking in the people's languages, is capable of addressing "the losers" in the modern rat race, giving them refuge in a made-up traditional past and incorporating them in his progressive (though still somewhat romantic) agenda.

The second story of "Yokhanan The Melamed's Stories" series portrays the modern working environment. One of Yokhanan's students, Itsikl, takes Yokhanan on a visit to his father's factory. There the workers are reduced to being simple accessories of the machine, as Yokhanan observes "the working man and his workshop seem as one body, as one who is suffering from epilepsy who throws himself, shakes and sits…"[725] As Yokhanan's ears become deaf from the "sea of sounds" he hears in the plant, this thought comes into his head and later he asks Itsikl:

> *And if the greatest prophets were to come here, in this hell, ... Isaiah, Jerimiah... and if it were Moshe Rabeynu himself, – when they want to open their mouths, and wish to speak – would they have outshouted this hell? Would one of these tormented souls hear them?*
> *No, absolutely not! I'm thinking and running out, covered with cold sweat from fear!*
> *And we're going further through a narrow anterior–room, and Yitskhok and I can't go through together...*

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[724]Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 8.

[725]Ale verk, vol 4, 74.

Why is it so narrow here? I ask.
Here the workers get searched, – answers little Yitskhok – one after the other they get searched…
Why?
People steal from the plant… tools… merchandise…
Thieves they are, thieves? Are they thieves? Thieves?
Not everybody, God forbid! Only some are being suspected!...
And when some are being suspected, all of them get searched?
My father says, that you can't disgrace just one, so even the manager gets searched…(Ale verk, vol 4, 75)

The great irony of this passage lays in the observation that the oppression of the workers is something that the reactionary-protagonist can sense and be sensitive about, while the capitalist – portrayed by Itsikl, the son of the factory's owner, who was once perceived of as the progressive class, is totally blind to the suffering and humiliation he inflicts upon his labor force. The modern working place is no less than a hell on earth which is louder than the voice of any prophet, and the radical-conservative is the one who points this out.

In 1897, modern Jewish politics were on the verge of establishing an identity, with both political Zionism and the Bund established that same year. Each movement offered a different yet equally modern solution to the plight of the Jewish working class. And each of them, Peretz tells us, will have a hard time competing for the hearts of the Yokhanan Melameds of the world.

We will now examine Peretz's most popular Hasidic work, written at the beginning of the twentieth century, which also marks his evolving approach towards literature altogether.

The Radical Undertone

Writing in his memoirs, the Yiddish writer Avrom Reyzen explained why those who "call for rebellion", (in Bergelson's words "the radical readers"[726]), were attracted to Peretz's short story "If Not Even Higher: a Hasidic Story" which was first published in Yiddish in 1900:[727]

> *"The radical reader looked for social and universal content in the story, especially since Peretz – the creator of "Bontshe Shvayg" – wrote it, and thus it was certainly kosher."*[728]

The story "If Not Even Higher", which became one of the most famous Yiddish stories of all time,[729] was written by Peretz while in prison. Peretz, together with fellow writer Mordkhe Spektor, was accused of appearing at an illegal workers gathering. The oppressive Czarist regime forbade the right of assembly. Peretz spent three months in jail as a result, and some argue, like Reyzn, that this experience changed his political perception and with it his writing style.[730]

Rozentsvayg, writing in Stalin's era in the Soviet–Union, argues that this romantic-nationalist material fit the nationalist-reactionary tone of the Yiddish Zionist journal in which it was first published in – *Der yud* (The Jew). In his view, it signified a distancing of Peretz himself from

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[726]See the quote by Bergelson at the beginning of the chapter.

[727]Y.L. Perets, "*Oyb nisht nokh hekher*." *Der yud* 2 (1900), number 1, 12–13. "*Oyb nisht nokh hekher*." In Ale verk, Vol. 4, 98–102.

[728]Reyzn, *Epizodn fun mayn lebn: literarishe erinerungen* 1, 238.

[729]The story is considered, together with "Between Two Mountains", to be the climax of Peretz's Hasidic stories, see: Frieden, "*Parodya ve–hegyogrfya: sipurim khasidiim–kivyakhol shel Perets*," 46. This story is often retold in various popular publications of and about Yiddish literature.

[730]Reyzn, *Epizodn fun mayn lebn*, 1:238.

the workers, their interests, and from the ideal of class war in general. He writes: "Peretz had thus stepped in at the time in his sad mission – to be the literary-artistic agent of the bourgeois-nationalist as *if above* class ideas in the petit bourgeois and proletarian environment."[731]

So which is it? Does Peretz use the Hasidic motives in a subversive and sophisticated way in order to call for revolt? Or does he suddenly "become" a romantic–nationalist who abandons his radicalism and progressive undertones of the *Yontef Bletlekh* years? Is he writing quasi–Hasidic stories? Peretz's sub–heading for the story "If Not Even Higher" is "*A khsidishe dertseylung*", a Hasidic story. Is he parodying Hasidism and Hasidic literature or glorifying it?

I argue that a story such as "If Not Even Higher", is indeed progressive in its humanistic message, even though it does not contain any explicit socialist content such as class war. As previously shown, Peretz has some stories that are more maskilic in tone, but gradually he realized the mobilizing potential of the social construct that is religion. This social construct was defined by Marx in a very humanist yet critical fashion as: "the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."[732]

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[731]Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 99–101. This position is in contrast to that of Bergelson that is quoted above, who was pro–soviet but wrote it before Stalin's era, see: N 1.

[732]Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique if Hegel's Philosophy of Right in: Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher*, February 1844; Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Ed. Joseph O'Malley; Translated: Annette Jolin. Rozentsvayg, as many Marxists, regards Hasidism merely as "opium"(p. 100); thus echoing the famous Marx about religion being "the opium of the people". But this is as shown above, only a part of that famous quote.

The Yiddish story "If Not Even Higher" was based on an older Hasidic tale in Hebrew.[733] Unlike typical Hasidic hagiography, where the narrator is a passionate Hasid telling a story that glorifies his Tzadik (and in which he himself plays a small role in this story of the observer), Peretz uses a Hasid as a storyteller, but he recasts the tale by using a doubtful Litvak as his observer and he makes that observer the central figure. During this very short story (4.5 pages in Yiddish and almost the same in its Hebrew version), the skeptical protagonist undergoes a transformation in his attitude towards the Hasidic religious leader, becoming a believer in the Tzadik's moral virtues and leadership strengths.

The story revolves around the Rebbe of Nemirov[734] who disappears every year during the penitential prayers preceding Yom Kippur. His followers believed that he rose up to the heavens to plead on behalf of his congregants in the holy courts. The Litvak doesn't believe this theory and wants to see with his own eyes what's really going on. He hides under the Rebbe's bed, and then watches, as the Rebbe disguises himself as a poor non-Jewish peasant. The Litvak follows the Rebbe as he goes to chop wood in the forest and then takes the wood to an elderly Jewish woman. Without accepting payment, the Rebbe sets up the wood and lights a cozy fire for her in her fireplace. While the Rebbe is working around the fireplace, he hums the Jewish ritual hums of the penitential prayers (*di slikhes* in Yiddish). This humanist gesture by the Rebbe turns the doubtful Litvak into a Hasid, a devoted follower of the Rebbe. And thus the story ends:

> *The Litvak, who saw everything, remained a follower of the Rebbe of Nemirov.*

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[733]Dan Ben–Amos and Dov Noy, *Folk tales of the Jews: Tales from Eastern Europe* (United States of America: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 61; Nicham Ross, "Hasipur hakhasidi keyetsira sifrutit: dilema pedagogit u-fitrona," (Hebrew) *Mayim medalav* 18 (2007), 305-308, 328-331.

[734]Meaning the Hasidic leader (or the Tzadik) from Nemirov, in the Ukraine), see N666.

And later, if a Hasid said that the Rebbe of Nemirov rises up at the time of the penitential prayers every morning, and flies up into the sky, the Litvak stopped laughing, and would add quietly:

If not even higher![735]

In this story, Peretz offers a humanist interpretation of religion. He shows an understanding of the social function of Hasidism, itself a strictly modern strand of religion.[736] His vision is a social construction that promises some sense of communal life in an age of increasing social atomization and alienation.

In order to shed light on Peretz's work, one must compare his story with the original Hasidic version, and strive to understand how Peretz reworked it. The original story appeared in Hebrew in the book *Ma'ase tsadikim* ("Story of Tzadiks", 1864) by Menakhem Mendl Bodek.[737] Peretz splits the role of the Hasidic narrator and observer into two (the Hasidic narrator and a doubtful Litvak as an observer-protagonist). He also changes the setting of the story with respect to the observance of Jewish the Jewish calendar when the story takes place from the nightly ritual of Tikkun Chatzot (an after-midnight prayer to mourn the destruction of the temple) in the original, to the yearly High-Holiday prayers, the penitential prayers which are recited communally between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. By changing to the less frequently occurring but and better known Jewish ritual, Peretz was adapting the story to his modern readers, who were not as likely as Hasidic Jews to be frequent synagogue visitors.

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[735]Peretz–Ale Verk vol 4, 102.

[736]Beginning in the mid 18th century, corresponding with the beginning of the so called "enlightenment era", some argue that the Hasidic movement historically embodied an adaptation to the liberal–individualist ethos. It did so by stressing the ethos of personal redemption rather than any sort of collective one. In any case, Hasidism falls squarely under the category of religious modernism.

[737]Menakhem Mendl Bodek, *Ma'ase tsadikim* (Hebrew) (Lemberg: 1864), 40-41.

Peretz also adds an introduction in order to get the reader into the Hasidic world and mindset as he imagines it. This setup was not necessary for the original Hasidic story, which would have been told by Hasidim to Hasidim and would not have had need for such a bridge. Interestingly there is no trace in the original story that the Hasidim believe that the Rebbe is traveling to the heavens. Instead, it is sufficiently awesome to the reader to observe that the Rebbe chants a *nign* (wordless song of prayer) in a very elevated manner.

Peretz also changed the identity of the woman whom the Rebbe visits. In the original it is a poor Jewish woman ("*bat yisrael*") who is giving birth at the time of the visit to a baby boy. Perez changed this character to be an old and sick Jewish widow who is left alone because her son is at work. In this way, Peretz eliminates any suspicion of a sexual connotation which a modern reader might have suspected in the original – a younger woman, giving birth alone (something the Rebbe was involved in?), which might have given the story an unintended quality of an anti-Hasidic maskilic satire.[738]

In the original a young male Hasid is about to be born, a sign of continuity and vitality – in Peretz's shtetl people are older (birth would be somewhat of an anomaly in a "dead town") with little future ahead of them. Peretz's characters are also more needy (the temporality of giving birth versus the constant bad state of the old sick woman). The coldness in her house is emphasized in the original:"...in her house it was freezing cold, because it was then one of those winter nights when it was very very cold. And the woman in childbirth, her bones were shaken because of the coldness and the chill."). Thus the importance of Rebbe heating up her place becomes bigger, and his action in such a short story even more glorified. In Peretz's

[738]See Ross, "Hasipur hakhasidi keyetsira sifrutit: dilema pedagogit u-fitrona," 329-330.

story the woman is "*farviklt in shmates*" ("wrapped in rags") – almost the sole indication of the low temperature.

The elaborate description of the cold temperature that appears in the original version stands out as a rarity. In general, the original story, which is much shorter than Peretz's, focuses tightly on the actions of the characters rather than on descriptive details. Peretz's version significantly expands certain features.

In the original, after the woman says she doesn't have the money to pay for the wood, the Rebbe answers that he will come back tomorrow to collect, and they move on to something else. In Peretz's version, the woman tells him twice she doesn't have the money to pay (can't buy and can't loan). When the Rebbe answers the second time he starts off with a whole monologue on the subject:

> *Silly person – scolds her the Rebbe, – look, you are a poor sick Jewish woman and I trust you, I have faith that you will pay; and you have such a mighty strong God, and you don't believe him… and for a measly six coins for a small pack of wood you have no faith in him! (Ale verk, vol4, 101)*

The "scolding" (*musern*), calling her "Silly person" (*narish mentsh*), could be interpreted as a patronizing attitude by the Rebbe, or just as a friendly tease. But more importantly, Peretz's addition of this moral lecture concerning the importance of faith is a point he wants to emphasize for his modern readers. For his readers, who had lost (or who were in the process of losing) their faith in a transcendental being, Peretz wants them to retain faith in the moral values of helping and of being able to trust your fellow man. It also meant to teach his modern readership regarding the social role of faith and religion amongst the lower classes.

As previously mentioned, in Peretz's version the role of the observer dramatically increases. In the original the peeking Hasidic narrator appears only at the beginning and at the end of

the story. Peretz makes the peeking character, the Litvak, to be a central character in his version of the story. The readers follow the story the Litvak's eyes and ears. We follow his reactions, his senses (he "sees" and "hears" the actions that take place), his feelings, his thoughts. We follow the way he starts to shriek when he stays alone with the Rebbe and is under the bed ("*eyme*", "*shrek*"), and when he is "shaking" of fear when following the Rebbe in the night to the forest. There the Litvak is "startled and amazed" ("*nivl venishtoymem*") seeing the Rebbe chop wood before he visits the woman. In the original the Rebbe chops the wood in the woman's house, after the woman asks him to do so. Peretz adds the visit the nightly visit to the forest, a literary convention that signifies the unknown, the uninhibited, and the lawless surroundings (a place where miraculous transitions might occur) in order to intensify the drama, and to signify for the modern reader a transition to a different reality. In this case it is a transition from the modern world to a world based on morality and the scales of justice.

The moaning ("*krekhtsn*") of the old woman and the Rebbe, and vocals in general, play a significant part in Peretz's version, and are absent in the original. The Litvak listens to the Rebbe moaning in the beginning, when his "cold heart" is not effected by, in contrast to the Hasidic narrator who imagines it expresses the "sorrow for all the Jewish people". The Litvak hears the Rebbe moan when he is putting the wood into the fire place, then he is has already transformed to a Hasid who "hears" the Rebbe's *nign*. He is also the one who recognized the voice of the person the Rebbe is visiting as the sounds of a "poor Jewish woman". This extensive use of vocals is how Peretz emphasizes the eavesdropping "spying" position of the Litvak. His spying actions are expressed in the language as well. The Litvak "sneaks himself in" (*ganvet zikh arayn*) – first inside the Rebbes house, crawling under the Rebbe's bed, and later inside the woman's little house following the Rebbe. Peretz elaborates the role of the

observer as a meaningful literary device, playing the role of the outside spectator, the spy, observing the actions of "those" Hasidic Jews, who here play a performative-metaphoric role for the modern reader. Adapting to a modern readership, who like Peretz, are the modern "enlightened" people looking from the outside at this imagined pious community.

By casting the stereotypically extreme–rationalist, skeptical Litvak figure as the transformed character, he throws the Enlightenment's version of rationalism and science into doubt. Adorno and Horkheimer criticized the Enlightenment for failing to consider moral questions adequately.[739] Peretz injects this direct concern for morality into the story when he shows that the mystical journey to heaven (believed only by his literary Hasidim) is actually achieved by a moral and earthly act of kindness for another person, performed without recompense or recognition by others.

It is also important that Peretz chose here to adapt a Hasidic story in which the Rebbe reaches out to the poor person, a poor Jewish woman, and assists her, while disguised as *goyish* peasant. The act of disguising oneself, which Peretz dramatizes using dialogue in Polish, is something Peretz and his modernizing readers can relate to. Like the Rebbe, they too operate in both worlds, knowing both Yiddish and the "state language". The act of performance operates here in both ways: if the Rebbe can play the common "goy" (which is also the way *shtetl*-Jews would relate to the modern Jew in Peretz's writing), then the modern reader can certainly play the common "Jew", and become organic intellectuals aligned with working class Jews.

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[739]Adorno, T. W., with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).

One can also compare the relations between Jews and Gentiles in this story concerning pious people with the secular nationalist characters in "In The Mail-Coach" that was discussed in the first chapter. The latter story from 1890 portrayed the tense relationship between the Jew and the Gentile, both middle class, and exposed some Jewish–chauvinist sentiments. In "If Not Even Higher" the highest Jewish ideal is to assist your fellow human being is expressed; and it takes place among the lower classes. This is the social and universal content the radical reader looked for in the story that Reyzn was referring to.

Peretz here does not focus his critical arrows against Hasidism per se, not even against his literary Hasidic representations who believe in the Rebbe's divinity.[740] Not necessarily at odds with the social significance of the story, Peretz is interested in exploring the power of the individual man to be a charismatic and stimulating positive force for others. This interest reflects a Nietzschean influence.

In order to fully examine the thesis, regarding the Jewish labor movement taking inspiration from the Hasidic world in order to glorify its own struggle, one has to look into what is considered by many scholars as Peretz's highest achievement in writing Hasidic stories—— that is the Yiddish story "Between Two Mountains" (1900). That is while considering other important aesthetic and ideological aspects that this text richly posses.

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[740]As Finkin argues in Jordan D. Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 161 n53.

"Between Two Mountains": Dreaming of an Ethnic–Class Jewish Identity

The story "Between Two Mountains" uses, as in "The Teachings of Hasidim", a simple Hasid (a *melamed*, a teacher) to be the narrator. He tells the tale of the confrontation between two archetypes of Eastern-European Jewish thought: a mitnaged rabbi (the rabbi of Brisk, or the *brisker*) versus a Hasidic Rebbe (the Rebbe of Biyale, or the *Bialer*). The story ostensibly takes place during the early days of the Hasidic movement. It has no real historical backing,[741] but this setting offers a way for Peretz to examine the spirit of the Hasidic revolution, with having "Hasidism representing the proletariat."[742] The narrator is a teacher in the home of a rich mitnaged; his patron represents the capital over which the two archetypes and "Jewish cultural capitalists" fight to gain control. The rich mitnaged's daughter married the son of the Brisker (according to the late Yiddish version of the story), and the Hasidic narrator calls for the Bialer for help when the Brisker's daughter has trouble giving birth. On top of all this, the Bialer Rebbe is a former student of the rigid Brisker Rov; he left the world of the "Litvish" Yeshiva, which he viewed as dry and disconnected with people's life following a dream he had.

In the introduction to Peretz's Hasidic stories in Hebrew, the Hebrew literary critic Reuven Braynin wrote:

> *In his story "Between Two Mountains" Peretz achieved one of the highest levels in his creative work. In this story he is not just a poet but also an artist. In this story he maintained the "secret of austerity". The poet and the creator became the defense attorney of the Hasidic world (the same Hasidism that fits*

[741]See: Ross, "I.L. Peretz's "Between Two Mountains"," 107-109.

[742]Ibid, 115.

> *the folkist Peretz), but he didn't deprive the world of the mitnagdim of its unique value. Of course the artist would have achieved an even higher level if he had not put his head between those two mountains and been affable towards one side while showing an angry face towards the opposite side.*[743]

Braynin viewed this story an apology for Hasidism and as Peretz's literary climax. He only criticizes what he sees as Peretz's favoritism towards Hasidism against the *mitnagdim*. Like Braynin, Ken Frieden views this story as "the masterpiece that best illustrates how Peretz recycled tradition in order to innovate."[744] But, contrary to Braynin, Frieden attributes the success of the story to the fact that Peretz does *not* take any clear side:

> *[Peretz] balances the merits of the two groups [Hasidim and mitnagdim]. The narrator is clearly biased in favor of the Bialer Rebbe; yet Peretz makes him an unreliable narrator with his superstitious belief in his Rebbe's powers. Many readers find the Rebbe more attractive than the mitnagdic Rov, but at the same time, Peretz permits a powerful portrait of the Brisker Rov {a mitnagdic rabbi} to emerge. This is definitely no longer a simple anti-Hasidic story. It does not assume the perspective of a Hasidic disciple simply in order to undermine his credibility.*[745]

So "Between Two Mountains" shows both favoritism towards the Hasidim (=proletariat), but also acknowledges the strength of their opponents, similar to the way Marx was simultaneously at awe and totally rebellious towards the bourgeoisie.[746] In the first stages of the story, the prodigious young Yeshiva student and future Hasidic Bialer Rebbe dreams about being led by the Brisker Rov through the halls of a great palace with shiny crystalline

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[743]Reuven Braynin, "*Y.L. Perets betor meshorer ha-hasidut*," (Hebrew) in: I.L. Peretz, *Khasidut* (New-York: Kadima, 1917), V.

[744]Frieden, "Tradition and Innovation," 57.

[745]Ibid, 58.

[746] "[The bourgeoisie] has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals", but on the other hand, "for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, [The bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." (Taken from fist chapter of the *Manifesto*, see Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," *Marxists*, accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm .

walls. It was the palace of the nether paradise, without windows and without doors other than the one they entered through. There was no sign of other people, just the Brisker and his student. The student became tired from walking, his eyes tired from the constant shine inside the isolated palace. And so, the dream continues, as told by the simple Hasid:

> *A strong longing fell on him, a longing for Jews, for friends, for all–of–Israel! A trifle – one cannot see any Jew in front of him!...*
> *Do not long for anybody – said the Brisker Rov – this is a palace only for me and for you… you will also one day become the Brisker Rov!*
> *And the Rebbe became even more fearful and pushed himself against the wall, so as not to fall down.*
> *And the wall scalded him! But it did not scald him as fire does, but as ice scalds!*
> *Rabbi! – he gave a scream – the walls are ice, not crystal! Simply ice!*
> *The Brisker Rov was silent.*
> *And the Rebbe screamed more:*
> *Rabbi! Lead me out of here! I do not want to be alone with you! I want to be together with all–of–Israel!*
> *And barely had he uttered these words when the Brisker Rov disappeared and he remained all alone in the palace.*
> *He doesn't know any way, neither in nor out; from the walls a cold fear struck him; and the longing, for a Jew, to spot a Jew, even a shoe-maker, or a tailor, became all the stronger in him. And he began to weep heavily…*
> *"Master of the Universe", he pleaded, "take me out from here! Better in hell with all–of–Israel together, than here all alone!"*
> *And at that moment, a simple Jew appeared in front of him, with a red belt, the kind that coachmen wear, on his hips, and a long whip in his hand. This little Jew, while being silent, took him by his shoulder, led him out of the palace, and disappeared. Such a dream was shown to him!*[747]

The dream portrays a clear dichotomy facing the prodigious-student between the elitist ivory tower of the rationalist, cold "Litvish" Yeshiva and the outer reality of connecting to simple Jews. Peretz here is alluding to Dostoyevsky's negative portrayal and polemic against London's "Crystal Palace" (originally a huge iron and glass structure, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851). The palace became the symbol of rationalist utopia for Russian social

[747] Ale verk, vol8, 104-5.

reformers. Dostoyevsky visited the palace in the early 1860's and mentioned it in two of his writings *Winter Notes on Summer Reflection* (1863) and in his novella *Notes from the Underground* (1864). In the latter text, Dostoyevsky uses the symbol of the "Crystal Palace" in order to counter the positivist-rationalists' ideal of a society which is based purely on rationalist foundations; a predictable society where people conduct their choices based solely on their interests. Dostoyevsky champions the notion of the individual's independent choice, even (and maybe especially if) the individual desires a "stupid choice". This because "… it preserves for us what is most precious and most important – that is, our personality, our individuality."[748] Dostoyevsky wrote these words a few decades before Nietzsche, and his work had a significant impact on the Yiddish and Hebrew literary republic of the early 20th century.[749] Peretz borrowed this metaphor from Dostoyevsky, creating a setting for his dream of a Jewish crystal palace, which turns out to be a shaky, cold palace made out of ice.

In constructing the Jewish setting, Peretz goes back in time,– ostensibly around a hundred years, but really to a mythical Eastern European Jewish time that never existed – in order to portray a conflict between the nascent Hasidic movement and the leaders of the traditional "Litvish" yeshivas. Peretz wished to equate the dream of escaping one world and connecting to another with the dilemma of the modern intelligentsia between elitist ideologies and inclusive ones. He also explored the conflict between the individual's will, which consists of reason, versus his unpredictable impulses.[750] It was these more human, emotional impulses

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[748]Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, English trans. Constance Garnett, edited with introduction Charles Guignon and Kevin Aho (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 22. About the Crystal Palace, see also: Ibid, p. xix n16, and p. 19 n8, and chapters 7-10 in the story.

[749]Miron, *Bodedim bemoadam*, 365.

[750]See in Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 21.

that led the yeshiva-student to flee from his yeshiva and to become a Hasidic Rebbe of the common Jews. Here Peretz depicts a process reminiscent of the one he himself went through in the 1890's. He went from being a Positivist, to encountering Jewish poverty during the statistical expedition, to embracing a form of socialism mixed in with some Nietzschean theories of the individual. Peretz eventually went on to serve as the de facto literary agent of the Jewish working-class, politically embodied by the Bund.[751]

The simple Jew in the dream functions as the protagonist's savior. Dressed as a coachman, this character alludes to a character in Peretz's late addition to the *Bilder* "The Dead Town".[752] In that story, the modern Jewish intellectual goes on a ride and hears a monologue from a fellow passenger about the death of the Jewish *shtetls*. The speaker contemplates the possibility of an alignment with the Jewish lower classes.

In the story "Between Two Mountains", we read about the revolutionary vision of going to the people (a clear Narodnik influence[753]), and then its realization the next day: Another "small Jew" like the one he encountered in his dream appears on his way to the Yeshiva where he goes to ask a learned man to help him decipher his dream. Instead, in true legendary fashion, the simple coachman helps him, using a language that alludes to the Biblical

[751]The non-socialist Nomberg wrote cynically about the phenomenon of how, unlike the Marxists Jewish leaders, "the great mass of the average Marxists, not wanting to be considered as staying behind, not–modern people, played along this game". Following the 1905 revolution and the cultural climate in the Russian cultural sphere, "our average Marxists became at the same time also passionate Hasidim… of course, they convinced themselves, that Hasidism is valid for them only in the realm of art, not in politics."(Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets*, 106).

[752]See first chapter.

[753]The Narodniks were left wing radicals in Russia, active during the second half of the 19th century, and influenced by the anarchist writings of Bakunin. Since the 1870's they embraced of the platform of "going to the people", and went to preach their ideas amongst the Russian peasantry.

commandment to Abraham to go to the Promised Land: "*gey dir dayn veg!*" ("*lekh lekho!*", go thy way!). And so, the revolutionary journey of the Hasidic leader begins.

What is the revolutionary vision that the runaway Yeshiva prodigy sets out to establish? How does he articulate his complaints against the world he left behind?

Against the world he left behind the Bialer has a chance, years later, to lay out in person his arguments to his former teacher and leader of that world, the Brisker. He tells the great Brisker Rov:

> *Your Torah rabbi, is just law, it's without compassion! Without a shred of charity is your Torah! And therefore it is without happiness, without breathing space… just iron and copper, iron rules, copper laws… and just exalted Torah, for learned people, for extra-ordinary individuals!... {…} and tell me rabbi, what do you have for the Jewish people as a whole? For the lumberjack, for the butcher, for the craftsman, for the simple Jew?... especially – for a sinful Jew? What, rabbi, do you have for unlearned men?*
>
> {…}
>
> *Pardon me rabbi, but I have to tell you the truth… rigid was your Torah, rigid and dry, because it is only the body and not the soul of the Torah*
> *{…} your Torah, rabbi, I told you, is only for extra-ordinary individuals, for learned people, not for all of Israel. But the Torah must be for all of Israel! The divine presence must rest on all of Israel! Because the Torah is the soul of all of Israel! (Ale Verk, Vol 8* Khsidish*, 115)*

The commitment to the law and the focus only on extra–ordinary individuals – a clear reference to Nietzschean philosophy[754] – , which the Hasidic rabbi attributes to the Yeshiva

[754]See for example: Niger, *Y.L. Perets*, 290-1. Nomberg sees the debate in this story between Mitnagdim and Hasidism as an adaptation of Nietzschean philosophical concepts (that the Hebrew writer M.Y. Berditshevsky introduced to the circles of Jewish intelligentsia at the time). This echoes the Protestant-Catholic debate in the modern-Christian world between the cold materialist religion and an emotive and mystical one respectively (Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets*, 105-107). Both the Hasidic and mitnagdic movements were pure abstract concepts for the modern intelligentsia. "Modernity", writes Eagleton, "by and large, is the era in which religion retires from the public sphere in the West to be cultivated as a private pursuit." (Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 44).

world, can easily be attributed to the liberal legalistic mindset and its focus on the individual. Even though the Bialer doesn't seem to be talking in class terms when he repeats the term "all of Israel", he only mentions working class Jews in relation to the broader Jewish public, hence, an ethnic-class approach. The Rebbe calls for the democratization of the Torah (the scholarly level), which figuratively means a broader application of liberal values of equality, exactly what socialists demand.

And what kind of revolutionary idealism[755] does the Rebbe offer instead of that rationalist world he just denounced?

The view from the Rebbe's porch in Biyale is the viewpoint from which the utopian alternative to the current reality would be revealed. The Marxist philosopher of Utopia Ernst Bloch distinguishes between "dreaming" and "day dreaming". A dream, in Ernst Bloch's terms, equals "a journey back into repressed experiences and their associations", which is exactly what the Bialer's dream in the beginning if the story was: the long years the Bialer spent as a student at the Brisker's Yeshiva appeared to him in the dream as a suffocating crystal palace, isolated from his imagined concept of society. On the other hand a daydream, in Bloch's terms, equals to an "unrestricted journey forward, through images of what is not–yet… fantasized into life and into the world." [756] The Bialer is eager to show the Brisker Rov an image of his not–yet; to show the Brisker what could be the meaning of his *toyre* (his teaching) in practice. And so, describes the narrator what he sees:

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[755]The words "revolutionary idealism" were used by Dan Miron to stress that Peretz's legends and Hasidic stories are the opposite of escapist. "They confront reality with a revolutionary idealism, with a demanding humanist system of norms, which is in essence foreign to the authentic folks-mentality and to the historical reality of Hasidism." (Miron, *Der imazh*, 113-114).

[756]Quoted in: Ernst Bloch, "The significance of the Utopia," in Avraham Yassour and Noga Wolff editors, Utopia: An Anthology (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011), 225.

A great, broad sky – truly infinite, and blue, so bright-blue was the sky, that it brought joy to the eye. Over the sky swam white, practically silver, small clouds, and when you took a good look at them, you saw, how they practically shiver from joy, the way they dance down with simkhes-toyre, *the joy of the Torah! Further in the back a green broad belt embraced the town, it was dark-green, but the green was lively green, so lively, as if a vital strength was flying around between the weeds; every time, it seemed, somewhere else blasts a vital strength, a smell, a life; – you clearly saw, how the small flames are jumping and dancing between the small weeds… as if they are hugging and kissing them…*
And on the meadows with the small flames sects and sects of Hasidim were circling around… the silk and even the lasting kaftans were glittering like a mirror, the ones that were torn just as the ones that were whole… and the small flames, that wrenched themselves between the small weeds, threw themselves and leeched into the mirroring holiday garments, and it seemed, that they are dancing around every Hasid, with enthusiasm, with love… and all the sects of Hasidim looked up with wonderfully-thirsty eyes to the Rebbe's porch… and the thirsty eyes, I was truly seeing clearly, sucking from the porch, from the Rebbe's face, the light, and as much light that they sucked, the louder they sang… all the louder and louder… all more happier, all the holier…
And every sect was singing its own melody, but in the air all the melodies and all the voices were being mixed up; and to the Rebbe's porch one melody was coming… as if everybody was singing one tune. And everybody is singing – the sky is singing, the spheres are singing, and the earth is singing from its very base, and the soul of the world is singing - - - everything is singing! (Ale verk, vol8, 116-7)

This passage resonates with Bloch's depiction of the daydream and how it portrays "grandiose plans about fixing the world, not related to the precious "me, myself" of a future anticipated by himself alone. And nevertheless the enthusiasm remains, the enthusiasm that soars out of love beyond the given means and situation. Indeed, this enthusiasm might create tension in us, trying to fill us full of life, and thus inspire us with an aspiration to move forward."[757] The Bialer's description also heavily resonates with the *Lebensphilosophie* and on Vitalism – the 19th century theories that emphasized the value of experience over abstract thought, and of the search for the spark that transfers from nature to every individual being. That spark was also interpreted as the soul, "the soul of the world".

[757]Ibid, 226.

Peretz's "day–dreamy" Hasidic stories were misread by both nationalist-conservative and Soviet interpreters. The first group analyzed these stories in a narrow nationalist framework, as embodying the soul of the Jewish people and romanticizing Hasidim.

The Soviet interpreters on the other hand, failed to see the progressive-utopian vision of a harmonious world that Peretz laid out. Rozentsvayg, who views this story as "an expression of the fundamental-ideas" of Peretz's creative work (specifically of his Hasidic writings), sees it as a "faithful unification of all–of–Israel", "the last whole kaftans joined together with the torn ones" surrounding the Rebbe's ostensibly democratic personality… this idea directly countered the ideal of class-war."[758] To back his claim, Rozentsvayg quotes from the end of the story quoted above; a description that he calls "a typical example of Peretz's reactionary-nationalist subjective-idealist art in this period."[759] Rozentsvayg and the other Soviets, failed to see how Peretz was using the Hasidim as a literary device to show moral ideals that have little in common with the actual practice of real Hasidim. Embodying the secular ideal of the intellectual who "speaks truth to power,"[760] Peretz paints us a picture of a world that is worth fighting for. He tells us that the social struggle for equality, with all the hardships and setbacks that it contains, could eventually lead to the establishment of a new world; a world which overcomes the modern sense of social alienation and instead would be governed by the reign of pure music.

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[758]Rozentsvayg, *Radikaler peryod*, 100.

[759]Idem.

[760]Taken from Bruce Robbins article on Edward Said's secularity, see Bruce Robbins, "Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said's' Voyage In?," *Social Text*, no. 40 (Fall 1994): 26. Quoted also in: Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Autumn 2006): 29). The "power" in this story is embodied by the Brisker Rov, who Nomberg considers to be the more impressive character of the two (Nomberg, *Y.L. Perets*, 113-115).

Conclusion

The radical works of Peretz is a body of work which reflects artistic, ideological, and political choices. I have shown that in a significant body of work during an intense period of time, the Yiddish and Hebrew writer I.L. Peretz made clear and obvious choices: he aligned himself with the needs of working class Jews in Eastern Europe.

Through an in-depth look at his cultural productions, incorporating both his Yiddish and his Hebrew body work, I have shown the complexity, and at times inherently tenuous, Peretz's process of becoming an "organic intellectual". I applied Peled's political-economy analysis regarding the rise of an ethno-class consciousness among Jewish workers in Eastern Europe, and showed that Peretz's instrumental role in the cultural sphere complemented what the Bund was doing in the political sphere. Rosentsvayg's first comprehensive study of Peretz's radical period was a source of inspiration for my work, but I revised his Orthodox Marxist viewpoint, applying tools from Neo-Marxist critics – Jameson, Eagleton, the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and the like. I also used Anderson's study of the rise of nationalism, and some post-colonial theory. I showed that Peretz's search for new artistic paths was not inherently contradictory with his radicalism, and in fact often it served to enhance the radical spirit, not to subvert it. That is also the case in his poetry, Hasidic tales, and short prose. His search for new aesthetics signified his desire to accompany his revolutionary politics with revolutionary art, and in the case of the *Yontef bletlekh*, it also meant revolutionizing the means of artistic production.

The great leader of the Bund, Vladimir Medem, wrote about Peretz and his relations with the Bund following Peretez's first *yortsayt* (the anniversary of his death) in 1916. Medem's

article was entitled "Us and Peretz", and it testifies to the deep importance of Peretz to the Bund, despite the fact that Peretz raised doubts in his later years over the validity of their struggle, as we've seen in one of his essays. This is despite Peretz's clear negative depiction of labor politics and labor activists in some of his later work, like the short drama "*A mol iz geven a meylekh*" ("One there was a King", 1907). Despite these criticisms and doubts, Medem did not lose sight of the bigger picture, and he acknowledged Peretz for his overwhelming contributions. He writes:

> *He became a piece of our lives. He wasn't "ours" in a rigid, narrow sense of the word. He didn't belong to anybody. Neither a party-person, nor a program-person; he was always searching; a broad, deep stream that sparkles, and makes noise, and digs under the mountains, and always hurls his waves further, always forward – to the far unknown sea.*
> *He didn't belong to anybody. And in the multicolored richness of his soul, and in the playful, sparkling flow of his ideas there was something foreign for us…*
> *And nevertheless he became a piece of our lives.*
> *Because our lives were also a part of him. He contained and absorbed in himself the broad, rich folk-life - possibly not all of it, but nonetheless it was our lives. He was absorbed it in, entwined it with beauty – and gave it back to us again. From us he took, from us he drew those priceless gifts, which he then lavished upon us.*
> *{…}*
> *Our souls were in him, and he became a part of our souls. And in that sense he is "ours".*
> *He felt himself as a part of our lives. But he felt it not only as peoples'-lives in general, and not only as Jews'-lives, not only as folks-life. He felt it as workers'-lives. He felt the worker's hardship and the worker's agony, and a thirst for justice and a cry for redemption come out of his works: our thirst and our cry.*
> *And if he used to turn back to the distant past and draw from it priceless stone for his artistic constructions, it wasn't a yearning for the past, but rather an outer form for his dreams about the future. And if the dream was weaved with mist, spun with clouds, it was nonetheless the dream of our future that we, awaken and secular, are preparing with a firm hand, with a clear eye.*
> *{…}*

> *The great poet gave us the treasures of his rich, warm, stormy heart. And we became richer, and prettier, and bigger. And all the higher our head rises, and stronger pounds our awakened heart, and the crooked, bent down back of "Bontshe" is becoming straight, firm and proud.(April 21, 1916)*[761]

These words by Medem encapsulate many of the things I was trying to say in my thesis. Peretz was the one who defined the starting point of the workers' struggle, set its goals and envisioned its future. By creating the silent Bontshe, the representative of the many "Bontshes" out there, who were marginalized and discriminated against – Peretz helped them gain the courage to fight back. By creating the revolutionary Bialer Rebbe (in what Medem terms "the distant past"), he helped them dream about the future they were struggling to achieve. And he chose to do so full heartedly.

During my work, covering an endlessly rich body of material while focusing on what I believe are the important points, many questions arose for further inquiries beyond the scope of my thesis. Mainly, but not exclusively, these are questions of comparative spirit. In what way did radical writers in other cultures negotiate the relations between their art and their political commitments? In what ways did they combine literature and aesthetics with radicalism? Specifically I would like to ask these questions regarding the literatures of ethnic-class fractions like blacks in America, or Jews of Middle-Eastern and North African origins in Israel. Such cases, where an ethnic-class consciousness has been developed, would benefit from a comparative look with what I have done in this thesis.

What insights can be drawn by comparing Peretz with modern early 20th century Chinese authors, such as Mao Dun – who was interested in the "Literature of Persecuted Peoples" and developed a strong interest in Yiddish and Jewish literature –, and Lu Xun – who also used

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[761]Vladimir Medem, "Perets un mir," in *Valdimir Medem tsum tsvantsikstn yortsayt* (Yiddish) (New York: Amerikaner reprezentants fun Algemeynem Yidishn arbeter-bund in Poyln, 1943), 344-345.

Gogol's ”Madman Diary” to criticize what he viewed as the provinciality of China, where "…for four thousand years they have been eating human flesh."? In what ways did writers in similar circumstances negotiate the dynamic trajectories of styles between naturalism\realism and modernist trends? What about later post-modernist trends? All are important and fascinating questions – Caplan's comparative work on Yiddish and other peripheral modernisms is a positive sign in this direction – that await further scholarship.

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